Jeremy Shaw's *Quickeners and Liminals*: Imagining Possible Futures

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Abstract

Jeremy Shaw's *Quickeners* and *Liminals*: Imagining Possible Futures

Sarah Ève Tousignant

This thesis examines the artist's cinema *Quickeners* (2014) and *Liminals* (2017), the first two episodes of *The Quantification Trilogy* by Berlin-based Canadian artist Jeremy Shaw (b. 1977; Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada). *Quickeners*, set five hundred years in the future, presents a group of immortal humans afflicted by Human Atavism Syndrome, which makes them behave like their ancestors. They perform antiquated rituals to return to a mortal state. *Liminals* is set in 2117, a time when humans attribute spiritual experience to a neurological phenomenon which they are able to reproduce artificially; they thus lose the biological ability to believe. *Liminals* focuses on a cult-like, peripheral, altruistic group of humans who use spiritual tools and inject machine DNA into their brains to save humankind from extinction. Four themes in both artworks bring into consideration underlying fears in the present day, such as technoanxiety, political and ecological crises, and the search for alternate forms of healing and spirituality in the American and Eurocentric world. Shaw's works can be seen as projections of a possible dystopic future. In his complex artist's cinema, the protagonists use spiritual tools for transcendence, such as dance, music, and technology. The concept of atavism underlined in the works raises questions about present-day cultural appropriation of traditional rituals. The trope of rebirth in the works recalls the myth of the god Dionysus and is presented as a way to perform time travelling in order to escape reality.

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Introduction

This thesis examines Canadian artist Jeremy Shaw's 31-minute film installation *Liminals* (2017), comprised of original footage, which is set in a future when humans completely rationalize religion, attributing it to neurological causes.[1] Living in the year 2117, Shaw's fictional humans have lost the biological ability to believe, and their only way to have a spiritual experience is through technology. *Liminals* focuses on the attempts of one group to save humanity from extinction by using diverse technologies, ranging from injections of machine DNA into the brain to restore damaged faith cells, to electronic devices and rituals borrowed from the past. I argue that its complex narrative meshes together several concurrent ideas—namely, techgnosis (spiritual transcendence using tools such as the *Dream Machine,* music, and dance, salvation from extinction through time travel, and the contentious evolutionary theory of atavism—in order to prompt viewers to engage more profoundly and critically with their present and future. In addition, I will integrate *Quickeners* (2014)—the first episode of Shaw's *Quantification Trilogy*—into this analysis in order to emphasize or isolate themes, techniques, and processes in the broader framework of the artist's practice. In *Quickeners*, Shaw describes the religious practices of an isolated community of immortal humans in the future who are afflicted by a syndrome that makes them want to regress to an earlier stage of their evolution and adopt irrational behaviours.

Contemporary societies are haunted by the increasingly dystopian qualities of reality, which are seeming more and more likely to become a permanent dystopic future.[2] In this context, *Quickeners* and *Liminals* could be said to depict, or even project, a vision of humanity on the

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1 Based in Berlin, Jeremy Shaw (b. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, 1977) graduated from the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in 2000. From the end of the 1990s to the late 2000s he led an electronic music project called *Circlesquare*, under which he released the album *Songs about Dancing and Drugs* (K7 Records, Germany, 2009) as well as four EPs (or shorter albums) from 1999 to 2006. During those years he moved to Berlin, regularly performing in the club scene in both Canada and Germany, where he continued to develop his music projects as well as his work as a visual artist. Early works include *DMT* (2004), an eight-channel video installation that documented people attempting to describe their experience using the hallucinogenic drug of the same name, and *Best Minds* (2007), a two-channel video installation presenting a straight-edge, hard-core crowd exiting a concert in Vancouver. His work explores themes of altered states of consciousness, drugs, trance, rituals, spiritual beliefs, and subcultures. Shaw won the prestigious Sobey Art Award in 2016. He is represented by the König Galerie in Berlin.

2 The word "dystopia" derives from the Greek *dys-* ("bad") + *-topia* ("place") and was popularized by British politician and philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) during a parliamentary debate in 1868. Gregory Claeys provides the following definition: "Dystopia is often used interchangeably with 'anti-utopia' or 'negative utopia', by contrast to utopia or 'cutopia' (good place), to describe a fictional portrayal of a society in which evil, or negative social and political developments, have the upper hand, or as a satire of utopian aspirations." In *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 107.

verge of extinction in the near future, suggesting a present-day warning. In fact, Shaw's works have been discussed in the context of shamanism making a comeback in contemporary art. In a statement that acknowledges that in the 2010s, people might well be going through a spiritual crisis similar to that which occurred in the 1960s, the artist opined, "Everyone always talks about how, in times of crisis, people start looking for God, and I think that's very synonymous with what's happening now."[3]

Premiering at the 2017 Venice Biennale, which was curated by the Centre Pompidou's chief curator Christine Macel, *Liminals* was presented in the Arsenale as part of the Dionysian pavilion—one of nine "chapters" (or families) of artists inspired by humanism—which celebrated art "as the most precious part of the human being."[4] The artist's cinema installation was presented in a small, white-walled room with eight chairs facing the projection screen placed in the centre and two surround-sound speakers at the back (fig. 1).

For the purposes of this study, I use the term "artist's cinema," coined by Maeve Connolly in *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site, and Screen*, to describe both of Shaw's works. Like Connolly, who uses this term to describe works that are "specifically interested in the claims that are made by artists upon, and for, cinema since the mid 1990s,"[5] I am also interested in cinematic works made by contemporary artists both within and outside the institutional context. I consider Shaw's work to be exemplary of "the various ways in which contemporary art practitioners have claimed the narrative techniques and modes of production associated with cinema, as well as the history, memory and experience of cinema as a cultural form,"[6] and propose a consideration of his works through this lens. For Shaw, the most obvious use is his intervention on the typically ethnographic and documentary redemption film genres of the 1960s and 1970s in the ways that it not only uses digitalized 16mm black-and-white footage with an aspect ratio of 4:3, but also its examination of human spirituality and the search for transcendence.

In Venice, *Liminals* was accompanied by Shaw's 2016 photographic series *Towards Universal Pattern Recognition*, comprised of four archival chrome black-and-white photographs

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3 Tess Thackara, "Why Shamanism Is Making a Comeback in Contemporary Art," *Artsy*, 11 August 2017, www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-shamanic-practices-making-comeback-contemporary-art

4 Christine Macel, quoted in Hili Perlson, "2017 Venice Biennale Reveals Curatorial Focus," *Artnet News*, 23 September 2016, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/the-2017-venice-biennale-will-focus-on-artists-not-big-themes-666668

5 Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site, and Screen* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), 10.

6 Connolly, 10.

depicting people praying or with arms raised towards the sky, a posture that Shaw describes as evoking abandon, victory, and submission (figs. 2 and 3). Mounted on their frames were kaleidoscopic translucent custom-made acrylic reliefs, creating a fractal effect and the fragmentation of the image placed behind, reinforcing the exhibition's exploration of spirituality and ecstasy. These aspects made it particularly fitting for the Venice Biennale's Dionysian pavilion.

According to the Biennale's catalogue description, "The Dionysian Pavilion celebrates the female body and its sexuality, life and pleasure, all with joy and a sense of humour, and features numerous works created by female artists."[7] Shaw's work includes female protagonists but they are not celebrated *per se*; the visual and aesthetic treatment of the characters does not vary according to their gender identities. Initially, the work might seem disconnected from Macel's theme, yet it responds to the original meaning of "Dionysian," which relates to the sensual, spontaneous, and emotional aspects of human nature. Dance, intoxication, religious ecstasy, ritual madness, and celebration are all elements ruled by the god Dionysus in Greek mythology (or Bacchus, in Roman mythology).[8] Shaw's work focuses particularly on rebirth and religious ecstasy: the goal of the protagonists is to transcend their current state of being and be "reborn" into a new form.

Set in 2117, *Liminals*'s narrative takes on a cinema vérité aesthetic that lulls viewers into thinking it is a documentary that repurposes archival footage from the 1970s, when in fact, the entire narrative was staged and shot by Shaw using 16mm film. It opens with a grainy three-minute sequence of a small empty dance (or Yoga) studio. A group of eight athletic dancers between the ages of twenty-five and sixty enters. Three are white and presumably cis-male, three are white and presumably cis-female, and two are people of colour and presumably cis-male. Choreographed by Justin Francis Kennedy, the cult-like group performs a series of movements and gestures drawn from a wide range of dance styles including modern dance (notably borrowed from choreographers Martha Graham, José Limon, and Merce Cunningham,) Yoga, Kundalini,

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7 Christine Macel, "Introduction," *La Biennale di Venezia*, http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2017/introduction-christine-macel

8 One of the harshest critiques of Macel's work as a curator was written by Jaclyn Bruneau in relation to Shaw's work as part of the Dionysian pavilion: "*Liminals* held a rare mirror up to the projects surrounding it, which more straightforwardly satisfied curator Christine Macel's lazy tenet: spiritualism as whimsical trend and ideological free-for-all." See Jaclyn Bruneau, "The Mindlessness of Mindfulness," *Canadian Art*, 10 January 2018, https://canadianart.ca/reviews/the-mindlessness-of-mindfulness/ Although beyond scope of this thesis, contemporary thinkers such as Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche have linked Dionysus with Christianity. See his book *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Osho Dynamic Meditation, Sufi/Dervish, Voodoo movements, and headbanging (fig. 4).[9] Daylight shines through a wall of ribbon windows, and the white room is shown from different angles as the austere authoritative voice of the narrator, played by actor Ian Dickinson discloses the context in which this supposed documentary was shot.[10] The dispassionate, empirical tone of the male voice seems to emulate the technique of older ethnographic documentaries no longer used in by present-day ethnographers because of the heteronormative patriarchal, and often-Eurocentric attitudes it conveys.[11] According to the voice-over narrative, the activity depicted took place after the Singularity Disaster of 2033, during a time of great confusion, dissolution of order, and uncertainty, although the nature of the disaster is left unexplained. The "technological singularity" is a term coined by mathematician John von Neumann to refer to a hypothetical future moment when artificial intelligence equals human intelligence—with the potential to surpass the capacity of the human brain.[12] Viewers can thus surmise that this moment has happened and that the consequences have been dramatic. As a result, "Periphery Altruist Cultures" are formed to save humanity from extinction. The people in the radical group featured in Shaw's pseudo-documentary are called "Liminals."[13] Capitalizing on a recently lifted ban on synthetic DNA, the group incites evolutionary enhancements to their bodies in order to save humankind. By performing ritual dances and injecting DNA into their brains to restore damaged "faith cells," they seek the liminal space that American science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany calls the "paraspace," which is located between the physical and the virtual.[14] In this space, the Liminals hope to concentrate on their goal to reach the next stage of evolution and transcend their bodily limitations. Therefore, paraspace is not their final destination, but rather a transitory place in which they seek temporary shelter.

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9 Justin F. Kennedy is a dance artist, teacher, and choreographer based in Berlin who hails from St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands. Inspiration for the movement listed by the artist, in a email to the author, 14 August 2018.

10 Ian T. Dickinson (b. 1963, Plymouth, England) is an actor and producer living in the United Kingdom and Berlin. He has been working in voice-over for more than twenty years. The only mention of his collaboration with Shaw is found on FAD Magazine's website: see Mark Westall, "Jeremy Shaw: Dancing, Coffee, Meditation and Spirit," *FAD Magazine*, 24 October 2017, https://fadmagazine.com/2017/10/24/jeremy-shaw/.

11 Thanks to Dr. Nicola Pezolet for this observation.

12 Published for the first time in John von Neumann's obituary by Polish scientist Stanislaw Ulam (1909–1984) in 1957.

13 "Liminal" is an adjective deriving from the Latin *limin-* (threshold) and has two main meanings: 1) Relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process; 2) Occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold. https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/liminal, accessed 26 July 2018.

14 A prominent figure in Afrofuturist literature, Samuel R. Delany (b. 1942, New York) is an African American author whose fictional works explore themes of memory, language, perception sexuality, and society. He coined the word *paraspace*, which he defines as a space existing parallel to our space.

As the dancers begin to stretch, the fluorescent lights of the studio are switched on and the title "Periphery Altruist Cultures: #4 The Liminals" appears in a classic modern sans-serif white font on the screen (fig. 5). A skinny young man with big brown eyes and long messy dark hair is interviewed. He speaks in an ancient form of glossolalia, or "speaking in tongues," said to be a traditional pre-quantum dialect that is instrumental in resuscitating faith cells in his brain.[15] In fact, his lines were first recorded in English and then played in reverse and digitally manipulated to make it sound like "faux-tongue." The interview is subtitled in English (fig. 6). According to the interviewee, a few generations ago science "quantified"—or found a rational explanation to—all religions and spiritual beliefs. Humans consequently lost faith and religions completely disappeared from the world, thus people started using a virtual reality system to recreate the now lost "spiritual experience." Biologically speaking, the part of the human brain responsible for neurological faith had atrophied. However, at the time of the documentary, it has just been discovered that faith cells are essential to evolution and even to human survival, and that their disappearance would mean the imminent extinction of the species.

The dancers are curiously shot, as if the filmmaker was using obsolete technology and amateur techniques, which gives the film an archival feel. The cameraman zooms in abruptly on the performers' faces or body parts, often showing close-ups of their hands. A hand-held camera gives an unsteady and slightly clumsy feel to the footage. A second Liminal—a thin young white woman with long dark hair—is interviewed. She also speaks in tongues, providing additional explanation. The diegetic sound, often dimmed down when the narrator intervenes, is the sound of the dancers moving around the space: bare feet on the varnished floor, heavy breathing, and occasional screaming. The sound quality is clear, and seems slightly anachronistic given the "primitive" qualities of the images.[16]Alongside the interview track are different tracks in the "world music" genre, ranging from African percussive beats, throat singing, and chants in foreign languages. The main electronic music track is from *There in Spirit*, Shaw's musical project with

15 The narration of *Quickeners* and *Liminals* does not reveal the exact meaning of the terms "pre-quantum humans" and "quantum humans." However, according to Shaw provided the following definition, taken from his films' legends: "2041 – The Quantification: discovers that all transcendental Spiritual/Religious experience is created by the exact same series of neural synapse firings in a specific 'Faith' area of the brain and thus, is discounted for being identical – ending the practice of all Religion and Spiritual inquiry. Humans are now without the promise of salvation by Spirit or Technology (AI). " Email with the artist, August 14, 2018.

16 Email to the author, 14 August 2018.

Konrad Black. According to, Shaw, this wide-range of music often directly related "the movements they [the Liminals] are enacting."[17]

The narrator, with his usual neutral, didactic voice, lists examples of actions performed by the dancers to restore their faith cells: irregular breathing, repetitive motions, continuous rocking, air gestures, and hysteria. Each element listed is accompanied visually by the dancers demonstrating the described action (fig. 7). The narrator describes "pre-quantification" secular twentieth-century devices used to facilitate the process of transcendence. Among these are a mirrored ball, a stroboscope, and (twentieth-century Canadian beat poet, writer, and artist) Brion Gysin's 1959 prototype of the *Dream Machine,* a kinetic apparatus that helps to relax its users through a rotating projection of light patterns (fig. 8). The young man interviewed at the beginning of the film says a few words about the fact that he and his group would free themselves from their bodies and egos to go beyond ultimate transcendence. The next sequence presents the group dancing and headbanging in slow motion, surrounded by a stroboscope and multiple beams of light reflected by a mirror ball. The now contemporary soundtrack is Jeremy Shaw and Konrad Black's electronic music project *There in Spirit*—the duo's only released track—which mixes ambient and electronic genres.

In the second-to-last sequence (25:56), the black-and-white analogue image pixelates and the aspect ratio shifts from 4:3 to a 16:9 widescreen. Implying a shift from analogue to digital, or a temporal shift in technological advancement, this video manipulation suggests an apparition of the future spilling through and taking over the obsolete technology. The face of a dancer emerges from the black-and-white film and transforms into colours as if the image was melting; the screen becomes saturated with bright psychedelic stains (fig. 9). The rhythm is constantly changing, accelerating and then slowing down repeatedly. Layered images blend into each other in a digital glitch effect. Shaw describes the digital manipulation technique in this sequence as "data-moshing,"[18] which is often associated with glitch and post-Internet art.[19] The soundtrack uses high-pitched electronic sound effects reminiscent of science fiction movies, with noises of acceleration and deceleration synchronized with changes of pace. In the final scene, the dancers

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17 Email to the author, 14 August 2018.

18 See "Biennale Arte 2017—Jeremy Shaw (Tavola Aperta)," YouTube, Venice Biennale Channel, 6 June 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9iJkUjz5j6A.

19 I use the term "post-Internet art" as defined by Marisa Olson: "A mode of artistic activity drawing on raw materials and ideas found or developed online." See Michael Connor, "What's Postinternet Got to Do with Net Art?" *Rhizome*, 1 November 2013, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/nov/01/postinternet/

slowly dissolve into mist amongst clouds of brightly coloured smoke and abstract patches of fluorescent colours (fig. 10). The last few shots show the deserted dance studio, indicating that the Liminals have successfully transcended.

Broadly speaking, Shaw's work is preoccupied with attainment of ecstasy; it is an element that is especially evident throughout his *Quantification Trilogy*, of which *Quickeners* (2014) is the first episode, *Liminals* (2017) is the second, and *I Can See Forever* (2018) is the third. In *Quickeners*, Shaw appropriates and reworks Peter Adair's documentary film *Holy Ghost People* (Thistle Films, 1967), which is about a Pentecostal Church celebration in a remote small town in America's Bible Belt (namely in rural Scrabble Creek, West Virginia) showing adepts performing chants, dances, and snake handling (fig. 11).[20] Through interviews, members of the church explain how they communicate with God, speak in tongues, and have found salvation through the Holy Ghost. *Quickeners* takes original footage documenting these weekly rituals from *Holy Ghost People* but reconstructs the images, dialogues, and narrative threads. The resulting story transforms the Pentecostal Christians into quantum humans from the future who are afflicted by Human Atavism Syndrome (HAS), a condition that makes them want to believe the same way that mortal humans of the past once did. Given the marginalized and often stigmatized status of Pentecostalism within Christianity in reality, this recasting of religious beliefs as pathologies of the future can be seen as problematic but is a risk that the artist takes to advance the film's narrative. *Quickeners* could be seen as a sequel to *Liminals* because it takes place later in time, but there is no clear evidence that the stories are related. The last episode of the series, *I Can See Forever* (still in production at the time of writing this thesis), focuses on the life of a cyborg in 2068, forty years in the future, and will feature the American dancer and choreographer Roderick George as its protagonist. The 27 year-old "Roderick Dale," who is the sole survivor of a government experiment, claims to have access to an alternate reality, or to "see

20 It is important to emphasize that the community depicted in *Holy Ghost People* do not represent all Christians, or, for that matter, all Pentecostals, but a marginalized group of believers. Pentecostal beliefs are more complex and nuanced than the scope of this thesis permits to explore. It is nonetheless worth noting that "gifts" such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, and the performing of healing miracles are seen as signs from the Holy Ghost of real conversion and true devotion in Pentecostalism. Also, because of their literal reading of some scriptures, Pentecostals were historically looked at with suspicion by other branches of Catholicism and often ostracized as orthodox. In the later pages, I talk about cultural appropriation of so-called non-Western belief systems, but in the case of *Quickeners*, a white Judeo-Christian religious group is also being appropriated and depicted under an unflattering light. As such, I suggest this aspect of the work brings into consideration different facets of the dominant white alt-right Christian movement very present in today's public discourse, especially in the US, and shines light on a more marginalized faction of Christianity.

forever" through dance. The work borrows from the aesthetic of outmoded television documentaries from the 1990s shot in VHS format and alternates between interviews and scenes from the everyday life of the cyborg.[21]

This thesis elaborates on the complex technological and cultural references of Shaw's *Quickeners* and *Liminals* in order to contextualize the work within the current shamanistic trend in contemporary art and its engagement with spirituality, technology, and imagining the future. Drawing from scholars in the field of new media studies such as Erik Davis and J. Sage Elwell, who explore the ways in which technologies impact spiritual beliefs, I argue that the idea of spiritual transcendence and the science fiction elements at the core of the narratives bring forward for consideration complex issues concerning the notion of atavism as well as the dystopic trend in popular culture and contemporary art. I borrow ideas (such as post-cinematic atavism and nostalgia) from the fields of film studies, sociology, and anthropology to discuss ways in which Shaw's work refers to the romanticization of earlier uses of technologies—and the technologies themselves—as well as the problematics surrounding the biological notion of atavism in relation to scholarship on the tropes of horror, primitivism, and technology. Finally, I borrow Jacques Derrida's notion of hauntology in order to elaborate on time travel in *Quickeners* and *Liminals*.[22]

In the fields of art history and new media art studies, little scholarship has been dedicated to the examination of the spiritual properties of new media art and its capability to emphasize the tensions between the human body and technology. Considered a foundational source on the subject, J. Sage Elwell's *Crisis of Transcendence: A Theology of Digital Art and Culture* (2011) asks a key question for this thesis: "What can the digital arts tell us about how technology is impacting the moral and spiritual identity of contemporary culture?"[23] According to the author, the digital revolution has an impact at a level of religious significance on the contemporary world but there is a gap in the recent theological literature that deals with technology. Attributing this to

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21 The description in the Venice Biennial's catalogue seems to conflate the narrative of *Liminals* with that of *I Can See Forever*: "For the 57th International Art Exhibition, Jeremy Shaw has produced *Liminals*, a short film taking the American dancer and choreographer Roderick George as its protagonist," and later, "Throughout the film, George recounts the story of the Liminals, a small group of humans who aspire to save the human race through the machine." See Christine Macel, *Viva Arte Viva: 57th International Art Exhibition: La Biennale Di Venezia* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2017). My hypothesis is that the descriptive text had been requested before the work was produced, and that Shaw later decided to make two separate films starting from this storyline.

22 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: L'État de la dette, le travail du deuil, et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), concurrently published in English as *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, [1994] 2011).

23 J. Sage Elwell, *Crisis of Transcendence: A Theology of Digital Art and Culture* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2011), xi.

the rapid evolution of technologies, he notes that the field of religious studies has had a difficult time reflecting on the social implications of new technologies on spirituality as they are happening. Elwell writes that art can constitute a good lens through which to examine how technology affects beliefs, but that it remains only a metaphor of reality, and must, therefore, be interpreted as such.

One of the ways in which beliefs have been affected by technology is provided by new media art theorist and occultist Erik Davis in his book *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic & Mysticism in the Age of Information* (1998), which explores the commodification and changes in self-perception experienced by technology users. Davis argues that contemporary humans see themselves as data and the world as code, in which relationships are forms of social algorithms, concluding that our time is witnessing a crisis of transcendence, which is exactly what is afflicting Shaw's protagonists in his artist's cinema. Davis writes: "The moment you have that notion that we are really information instead of bodies or souls, then you have that possibility of techgnosis."[24] Techgnosis, the question of the merging of the human into technology, and inversely, technology invading the human body, is a consistent characteristic of Shaw's artist's cinema.

Particularly influential on the following analysis of Shaw's work is the field of spectralities studies, which experienced its golden age in the 1990s following the publication of Derrida's prominent work *Spectres de Marx* (1993). In *The Spectralities Reader*, editors María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren define it as an academic discipline with transdisciplinary applications developed around the figure of the ghost which is used as a theoretical tool to consider issues in various fields, ranging from queer studies to psychology and cinema.[25] Derrida's ghost is often used as a lens through which to examine films and contemporary artworks. Likewise, I deploy the metaphor of the ghost in my analysis of *Quickeners* and *Liminals* to make visible the various time-related issues addressed by the work.

An inevitable reference in spectralities studies is British writer and musician Mark Fisher (1968–2017), also known under the pseudonym k-punk, whose article *What is Hauntology?*

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24 Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic & Mysticism in the Age of Information* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015), 76.

25 María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

brings into consideration the concept of nostalgia for lost futures in relation to electronic music.[26] Finally, the work of scholar Line Henriksen attempts to juxtapose the figure of the ghost to a web phenomenon called "creepypasta" which consists of the sharing and viral retelling of urban legends posted by anonymous users on discussion websites such as Reddit.[27] While creepypasta and the Internet age do not figure prominently in Shaw's series, it does inform his present-day site of production in the sense of ongoing discourse about the relationship between technology, spirituality, and how our futures may or may not be determined by them.

My thesis seeks to make a contribution to contemporary art's engagement with these issues by addressing the cultural lag between scholarship and works such as Shaw's *Liminals*. As journalist Tess Thackara observes,

> Exhibitions over the past couple of years—from the São Paulo Biennial to the Whitney Biennial—have to some extent pivoted away from an examination of the contemporary technologies that consume our lives, and toward forms of collectivity, self-care, shamanic rites, and an earnest interest in the sacred and ineffable. The development has prompted writer Ben Davis and others to point to a "shamanistic" trend in contemporary art practice.[28]

I argue that Shaw's pieces are clearly inscribed in this shamanistic trend in contemporary art, suggesting that the artist is aware of this movement. His work is telling of a present-day political and environmental insecurity in the so-called Western world, which is reflected in artistic production. The narration of *Liminals* closes with a definition of the concept of liminality in 2117 that may well be just as applicable today:

> The twentieth-century concept of liminality is defined as the ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of a ritual, as well as the temporary suspension of societal beliefs during periods of cultural and political change. Constructive and destructive in turns, this dissolution of order is said to create a fluid and malleable situation that enables unpredictable new practices, customs, ideas, and institutions to emerge. It is a period of great uncertainty and disorientation that brings back the potential of important new perspectives (30:06).

In February 2017, the BBC published an article about a Facebook group for witches dedicated to the performance of a mass spell to force US President Donald Trump to leave the White House.

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26 Mark Fisher, "What Is Hauntology?" *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012): 16.

27 See Line Henriksen, "'Come, So That I May Chase You Away!' On Ghost Hunts and Posthuman Ethics," *Somatechnics* 4, no. 1 (2014): 39–52, and "In the Company of Ghosts: Hauntology, Ethics, Digital Monsters" (PhD dissertation, Linköping University, 2016).

28 Thackara, np.

Coining the hashtag #magicresistance, the group attracted over 10,500 likes.[29] This kind of real-life initiative, whose popularity is boosted by its capacity to circulate through technological means—the Internet—is comparable to the Liminals' mission to save humankind with rituals borrowed from alternative systems of beliefs and technological tools. Shaw's work prompts viewers to imagine other possible futures.

This study is organized into four sections. Section One considers the characters in *Liminals* as techgnostics and in *Quickeners* as anti-techgnostics, and examines the meaning of spiritual transcendence for both groups. It addresses the salad of belief systems in Shaw's constructed mythology and provides an art-historical context for the works. This section underscores how Shaw's video installations can be interpreted as emphasizing underlying modern-day fears in regard to the omnipresence of technology, spiritual explorations in the Euro-American context, and political and ecological crises. Section Two discusses the ways in which dance, music, and technology—such as Brion Gysin's 1959 *Dream Machine*—are used by the Liminals as tools to achieve rebirth. Drawing on the myth of the Greek god Dionysus, this section examines the trope of rebirth present in *Liminals* and draws comparisons with popular culture and psytrance culture of the 1990s in an attempt to dissect the various references in the works. Section Three considers time travelling though hauntology's ghost figure that is embedded in the antiquated tools used by the Liminals as one of the key ways out of a dystopic world but also as a warning about the abuses of technology. Furthermore, it addresses how the use of found footage in *Quickeners* can be seen as a cultural recycling imbued with nostalgia. Finally, Section Four discusses the concept of atavism and its historical meaning, complicating the interpretation of the works.

29 "Witches Cast 'Mass Spell' against Donald Trump," BBC News, 25 February 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39090334.

SECTION ONE

Spiritual Transcendence in Times of Crisis

No specific religion is referenced to describe the beliefs of both groups depicted in the first two pseudo-documentaries of Shaw's *Quantification Trilogy*. However, it is possible to designate Liminals as techgnostics and Quickeners as anti-techgnostics in the artist's imagined futures. In their own way, each marginal cult-like group aims to shape a better future for humanity by means of spiritual transcendence achieved by the loose appropriation of antiquated, hedonistic, and esoteric rituals, as well as technological devices. American occultist and scholar Erik Davis compares what he calls the "metaphysics of information culture" to religious and alternative spiritual movements.[30] For him, a libertarian drive towards freedom, self-divinization, and a dualistic rejection of matter for the incorporeal possibilities of the mind constitute common grounds of cyberculture—a culture built around the use of computer networks—and Gnosticism. Historically, Gnosticism refers to Jewish and to early Christian groups in the Mediterranean world (often designated as "heretical") who dismissed materiality as part of the quest for "gnosis," a higher spiritual truth or mystical form of knowledge that would free them by allowing transcendence to an elevated state of being. In both cyberculture and Gnosticism, material life is rejected and an individual experience of gnosis is embraced. In these systems, beliefs are shared and an alternative worldview is disseminated. Davis coined the term "techgnosis" to describe this search for gnosis associated with technology.

"Tech" refers to technology, and "gnosis" is the Greek word for "knowledge." As Nathan A. Thompson puts it, "Techgnosis describes the way in which technology is haunted by spiritual dreams, fears, and hopes (…). The way we experience the power of computers very much recalls the old magicians who dreamt of devices that could give you all the information in the world—the ability to see into the past and to communicate over great distances."[31] Davis' techgnosis encompasses a wide array of occult notions (haunting, transcendence, mysticism, altered states of consciousness), and suggests that they are at play in technological communications. He argues that techgnosis is a "kind of information age update of Gnosticism, a Christian heresy in which

30 Davis, 97.
31 Nathan A. Thompson, "Haunted Technology: An Interview with Erik Davis, Scholar of the Weird," *Vice*, 22 December 2014, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/erik-davis-wants-you-to-follow-your-weird-283.

believers rejected the world of matter and yearned for gnosis, a flash of transcendent illumination in which individuals cast off the body and ascended to the real world of the spirit."[32] Both propositions bear the idea of individual experience and a disdain for materiality.

In Shaw's *Liminals*, mortal quantum humans in 2117 have lost the organic ability to believe because they rationalized the spiritual experience and found a way to artificially reproduce it through a virtual reality device called "the unit." However, they later discover that biological faith is what allowed survival and evolution, and are now consequently facing extinction. Because they "biologized" religion, they are now in trouble. The Liminals, a marginal escapist group, aims to save humanity by reaching a transitory space parallel to reality at the limit of the physical and the virtual, or "paraspace." To attain this, they use a mix of contemporary technologies, such as synthetic DNA injections that artificially recreate what biological faith cells used to do, and the performance of rituals using antiquated technological devices. These spiritual tools, they believe, help them to abandon control over their bodies and minds, which is a necessary step to transcend to the paraspace. The Liminals in Shaw's work are motivated by similar aspirations as the pre-Christian gnostics: They are driven by a spiritual quest and feel limited and even endangered by their physical bodies, which constrain them to mortality. They believe in the possibility of a form of transcendence from earthly matter that would happen via knowledge. In other words, they think that salvation is open to an elite who reached a higher level of knowledge, to a limited number or initiates.[33] Similarly to early gnostics, they see this passage as an individual experience, even though the processes to achieve it might involve group rituals. In the data-moshing sequence (26:55) that marks the moment of transcendence in *Liminals,* the dancers appear individually and are never shown together in the same frame, which suggests that they transcend one by one and not simultaneously as a group, a process that is also taking place in *Quickeners*. The way that the transcendental experience is depicted—as an individual moment, and through a collective process—echoes how Davis explains the gnostic rituals. Here, the bodies of the Liminals merge with synthetic DNA technology to escape from a predicted dystopic future. This mirrors the ways in which Internet users, both alone and together, employ computers to access a constructed cyberspace that technologically transcends the rules of reality. Thus the

32 Davis, 98.

33 Contemporary art itself became a form of surrogate quest for spiritual transcendence, a thought also echoed by Daniel Pinchbeck the modern world turned to artists and poets for a substitute to "the transformative power of an actual encounter with a supernatural 'other,' or the personal experience of an altered state." cited in Thackara. Thanks to Dr. Pezolet for bringing this observation to my attention.

Liminals can be seen as techgnostics who use spiritual transcendence as a necessary step to escape extinction.

Even if the story of *Quickeners* takes place in a different world and time as in *Liminals*, it is possible to interpret it is as a result of the altruistic actions undertaken by the Liminals. In a time when biological humans have been extinct for four hundred years, a new form of humans has reached an immortal—and, in part, dematerialized—state of existence. These quantum humans live in cyber-unison, forming a giant brain connected through the Hive, a cloud which contains all the knowledge of humanity, and is defined by one of the Quickeners as "the unitive consciousness and the simultaneous perception of all things" (5:59). This state of interconnectedness is not in itself techgnosis because there is no element of spirituality involved. This is simply a state of being, since the practice of any form of belief or religion has been rationalized and dismissed. However, a marginalized group in a remote area[34] suffers from an atavism that makes them experience temporary disconnections from the Hive, during which they behave irrationally as pre-quantification mortal humans did. During these disconnects, they are afflicted by Human Atavism Syndrome (HAS), an uncontrollable desire to have faith again, or to resurrect faith cells in their brains that went dormant after many generations of disuse. To satisfy this desire, they perform rituals and speak the languages of now-extinct mortal humans, which they found on the Hive's database.

Another symptom of HAS is the inclination for quickening, a phenomenon defined by the film's narrator as "a transcendent state that is empty of technological content but full of everything that only exists as information on the Hive" (6:21).[35] Towards the end of the film, the Quickeners perform chants, dances, and prayers. The image, until then shot in black and white, suddenly displays patches of pastel colours. Using a process of partial colouration and visual isolation, the individuals who successfully transcend are distinguished from those who did not.[36] Using this technique, Shaw emphasizes the individual nature of the experience, which depends

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34 Notably, West Virginia, the location where *Holy Ghost People* was shot, has been for many years an impoverished state with lower access to technology and a higher rate of drug-related deaths and complications.

35 It is worth noting that "quickening" is a term with clear Biblical provenance and resonance. Various forms of the verb "quicken" can be found in older Bible translations, such as the 1611 King James, a still very widely-used translation, favoured by many American Pentecostals. It is understood, in the Christian context, in terms of being "born again" and receiving a "new life" in Christ.

36 Interestingly, "quickening" in Christian terms is invisible but is visually expressed by a distinct colouration of the individual's body. Thanks to Dr. Pezolet for this observation.

on the sincerity and personal will of the adept. In an interview, a young female Quickener says that she feels tired of her immortal existence: "[The Hive] is ultimately a mundane plateau, and that kind of cyber-transcendence can become tiring" (6:02) (fig. 12). Quickening therefore becomes their way of returning to a mortal existence, or permanently disconnecting from the Hive. In this case, spiritual transcendence is uncontrollable: their desire to transcend is caused by HAS and is a glitch that needs to be cured. But when disconnected from the Hive they sincerely believe that it is wrong to live intertwined with and dependent on technology, and that rapture (in the non-technological sense) can save them. In their desire for a biological spiritual experience, they reject techgnosis and can be seen as anti-techgnostics.

Both communities depicted in *Quickeners* and *Liminals* are positioned as existing outside the mainstream environment. *Quickeners* presents a group of people biologically identical to other posthumans from their time, but afflicted by a disease (HAS). Similarly, the Liminals are essentially identical to their contemporaries, exhibiting no signs of glitches or syndromes. However, in an altruistic desire to save humanity from imminent extinction, they have injected machine DNA into their brains, and this differentiates them from the others. Both groups share knowledge, language, codes, and a perception of their own reality that is unique, similarly to online communities in virtual worlds such as Second Life or in multiplayer online role-playing games. They evolve in a constructed reality in which steps are followed and tools are required to reach a goal, which, they believe, will save them. They live within different sets of references than the "real" world. In many ways, their position as subcultures (that exist parallel to the mainstream) shares characteristics with Davis' cyberculture. In both worlds, the newly constructed system of belief bears the hope for a better faith than the one they would otherwise be destined to live.

Shaw's *Liminals* focuses on how a marginal group incorporates recent developments in new technologies—such as the use of machine DNA—similarly to how American Spiritualists repurposed early devices using magnetism and electricity for their own spiritual endeavours. In his book *Haunted Media,* Jeffrey Sconce establishes a relationship between the rapid developments in telecommunications and the rise of the Spiritualism movement in America in the mid-nineteenth century.[37] Spiritualism is constructed around the belief that the spirits of the dead

37 Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

communicate with the living, notably through the intermediary of a medium, or a person who claims to be in contact with the spirits. According to Sconce, the parallel between Spiritualism and telecommunications, such as telegraphy, is their common function to transmit information through a seemingly "invisible" channel.[38] For instance, both the telegraph and the medium allow for telepresence, or contact with a person who is not physically present. Modern technologies contributed to the rise of Spiritualism in a very direct way. Technological devices were often used during séances (meetings led by spiritual mediums in an attempt to contact the dead); for example, Spiritualists used pseudoscientific tools such as "spirit batteries," which were supposedly charged by the magnetic fields of a human entering into contact with a spirit in order to make the movement more credible.[39] Aligning itself with science, and surfing the wave of (not yet widely understood) new developments in magnetism, radio, and electricity, Spiritualism aimed to distinguish itself from other controversial spiritual movements.[40] Hence, technologies were used as complementary to the bodies of the mediums, or as tools to enhance them.

Similarly, in *Liminals,* the ban on synthetic DNA has only been recently lifted, and its usage is not dictated by a power structure but rather left to the discretion of users—in this case, the Liminals—who experiment according to their personal system of beliefs, knowledge, and goals, outside of the mainstream. It is important to note that contrary to mediums, groups depicted in Shaw's artist's cinema do not aim to communicate with the spirits of the dead, nor to achieve any form of communication. Their concern is not so much about their own individual deaths, but rather about the end of humanity writ large. For the Liminals, transcendence does not require death as in the nineteenth-century Protestant concept of rapture,[41] for instance; Liminals can reach a dematerialized existence without dying. As for the Quickeners, death is in part what they aim for, having grown tired of immortality.

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38 "Constructing a 'spiritual science' from doctrines of mesmerism, electrophysiology, and reformist Christianity (among other sources), the Spiritualists believed that the dead were in contact with the living. Through séances conducted under the direction of gifted 'mediums,' they believed the material world could receive transmissions from the dead through what they called the 'spiritual telegraph.' More than a metaphor, the spiritual telegraph was for many an actual technology of the afterlife, one invented by scientific geniuses in the world of the dead (…)" Sconce, 12.

39 Male (said to embody the positive charge) and female (negative charge) guests would hold a magnetized rope dipped in copper and zinc buckets filled with water, thus constituting a "battery" used by spirits to communicate. Sconce, 28.

40 "Spiritualism attempted to align itself with the principles of 'electrical science' so as to distinguish mediumship from more 'superstitious' forms of mystical belief in previous centuries." Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 28.

41 I use the word rapture in the sense of believers being "taken up" at the end of times prior to Judgement Day.

The sets of beliefs on which the Liminals base their rituals rely on the faith of the adepts, but also on their ignorance of the technological devices they use. They look back with nostalgia at antiquated devices—as if they hold the key to a better existence—without fully understanding how they function. According to Matthew A. Killmeier, the public once perceived the medium of radio as magical, as the absence of materiality conferred on it an aura of mysteriousness: "Radio signals traversed the electromagnetic spectrum—invisible, immaterial frequencies that lent it a supernatural aura."[42] Shaw's *Liminals* plays off of this forbidden fruit—the thrilling possibility that science holds the key to a better future—but they soon find out that advancements in science were what actually led them to the brink of extinction. This purposefully ambiguous conclusion, both praising the possibilities brought forth by science and technology and warning us that our original biology is in fact the best way of being, is very tangible in *Liminals*. Once again, Shaw ventures on a slippery slope, since the notion of an "original biology" may be associated with essentialism.

This loose appropriation and combination of spiritual traditions is clearly reminiscent of the psychedelic culture of the 1960s, in which Shaw confessed his interest through the list of books featured in his "unpacking my library" exercise.[43] In the US, the 1960s were an effervescent time marked by the emergence of a counterculture movement revolting against established systems and institutions. Social activist movements advocating civil rights, feminism, gay rights, anti-war sentiments, and environmentalism attempted to change the values associated with the ideals of the nuclear family and the American Dream. Following the trauma of World War II, the so-called Western world experienced uncertainty and a reconsideration of the establishments and institutions that had allowed such a conflict to happen. This period of doubt and the search for new ways of doing things was expressed through the arts, and was especially defining for the music and cinematographic productions of this decade. The hippie movement developed among the youth of San Francisco in the early 1960s. Spiritually, they loosely appropriated and adapted aspects from Eastern spirituality, in particular, Zen and Buddhism. For example, the concepts of nirvana, karma, and Dharma, along with the practice of yoga, became widespread. Hippies also massively rejected mainstream organized religions such as Judaism and Christianity, and embraced Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism, Indigenous traditions, or even all of

42 Matthew A. Killmeier cited in Susan J. Douglas, *Listening in: Radio and the American imagination, from Amos'n'Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Times Books, 1999), 45.
43 See section 2, p. 25.

them mixed together. Occult movements were also popularized with a rise of Neopaganism, Wicca, recluse sects "returning to nature," as well as secret societies and mystic orders including the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), and Theosophy. Timothy Miller described the hippie ethos as essentially a "religious movement" whose goal was to transcend the limitations of mainstream religious institutions: "Like many dissenting religions, the hippies were enormously hostile to the religious institutions of the dominant culture, and they tried to find new and adequate ways to do the tasks the dominant religions failed to perform."[44] Shaw's fictional characters and the hippies of the 1960s have in common a fascination with spirituality, altered states of consciousness, psychedelics, and alternative forms of spirituality. In reaction to a system that failed them and led to their imminent extinction, they surveyed the past, identifying other ways of doing things recycled from an earlier time, when the future looked brighter.[45]

As a series about transcendence, Shaw's artist's cinema follows a long line of other contemporary artworks, such as those by American visual artist Susan Hiller (b. 1940, Tallahassee, USA) that evoke the relation between technology and the spiritual realm.[46] Hiller finds inspiration in famous artists who were overtly fascinated by aspects of the occult. For instance, she departed from Marcel Duchamp's use of the artistic aura in his *Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel* (1910) to create her photographic installation *Auras: Homage to Marcel Duchamp* (2008), comprised of aura photographs taken from the Internet (figs. 13 and 14).[47] For Hiller, self-representation on the Internet conveys a "wishful desire to transcend human condition, defy gravity, show that you have a spiritual aspect of yourself even in a jokey sort of way."[48] Similarly, inspired by Yves Klein's iconic photograph *Leap into the Void* (1960) (fig. 15), her

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44 Timothy S. Miller, *The Hippies and American Values* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012), xxv.

45 Notably, *Quickeners* can also be seen as appropriating from groups marginalized from the dominant white Judeo-Christian system, namely Pentecostals. However, snake-handling practices are not widely used among believers and those who perform them were historically dismissed as heretics. Using a documentary about them and dubbing their sincere faith testimonies as expressions of a syndrome or an affliction might be seen as disrespectful towards today's Pentecoastals and Christians in general.

46 Sas Mays and Neil Matheson, *The Machine and the Ghost: Technology and Spiritualism in Nineteenth- to Twenty-First-Century Art and Culture* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2013), 109.

47 Marcel Duchamp had connections with André Breton and the Surrealist Movement, which had an interest in the occult. Ideas about the supernatural were broadly circulating within their common social circles at the time. *See* Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou, and Daniel Zamani *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics: In Search of the Marvellous* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

48 Mays and Matheson, 106.

series *Levitations: Homage to Yves Klein* (2008) (fig. 16) uses photos uploaded on the Internet of anonymous users shown as if levitating but in supernatural poses.

Hiller's mention of humour as a component of the process of self-representation is interesting, as there is also playfulness (or a soft self-mockery) in Shaw's works. She alludes to esotericism in a way that is similar to Shaw's. Both approaches are rather stylistic, and the artists position themselves as witnesses or amateurs of magic stories and related aesthetics rather than as serious practitioners of magic. Both works seem to bear the fascination the artists have for marginalized groups and their practices in a way that does not challenge but rather emphasizes the stigmas and clichés often associated with belief in the supernatural. However, in contrast to Shaw's series, Hiller's work is anchored in the present: her collection of aura photographs speaks to today's use of technology and the present-day obsession over public image on social networks and self-representation. Shaw's *Liminals* pushes the exercise a bit further to speculate on how today's habits and issues associated with technology will evolve in its exaggeration of these behaviours. Whereas Hiller is pointing at identifiable beliefs from the past—in auras and levitation—Shaw creates a whole new fictional system of symbols, techniques, and rituals borrowing from multiple traditions, some deeply rooted in ancestral religions and practices, such as Yoga, Kundalini, religious Shaker dances or different traditions of prayer, as well as non-religious activities, like screaming, dancing, and simply stretching the body. In *Liminals,* the point is not to reference something in particular, but to create a new scheme of references from whatever is available in popular culture.

In both of Shaw's *Quickeners* and *Liminals*, the process leading to spiritual transcendence raises a paradox: the simultaneous rejection and embrace of technology as part of a spiritual experience. In *Liminals* technology takes the form of synthetic DNA, a mirrored ball, a stroboscope and a Dream Machine. Interestingly enough, these artificial devices are used to reach a presumably somewhat divine and dematerialized state of being. In *Quickeners*, quantum humans *are* the technology: they are immortal cyborgs. But as much as they want to disconnect themselves from the Hive, they need it to learn essential information about pre-quantification ancestral rituals. A tension is present in the two works: the technology is depicted both as an essential tool for spiritual transcendence and as the cause of their problems, whether it is an imminent extinction or tiredness linked to the permanent connectedness. HAS itself is

attributable to a glitch in the programming of Quickeners in Area 23. Hence, in two different ways, Shaw's plots complicate the notion of techgnosis as something desirable and beneficial.

They also draw uncanny parallels to contemporary human life in the twenty-first century. The Hive, or "hive mind" is a broadly used expression in science fiction and popular culture to describe a form of interconnected, shared intelligence.[49] In *Quickeners*, The Hive, which is said to contain all the knowledge of the world, can be interpreted as a metaphor for the Internet. It also echoes new laws banning after-work emails in order to free employees from their "electronic leash,"[50] or programs such as Mail on Holiday, which automatically deletes emails received during holidays so that people will not be tempted to reply.[51] There is an increased awareness of how mobile devices and quasi-permanent access to the Internet blur the boundaries between work and private life, and how this affects stress and anxiety levels of many individuals. *Quickeners* and *Liminals* brings into question the necessity of being constantly connected through phones, computers, and other "smart" devices by presenting a narrative where this connectedness is exaggerated to the point of dystopia. The way the Quickeners chose to become mortal again, to "feel" and "experience" things that appear only as information in the Hive, is a clear advocacy for the predominance of real-life existence over the virtual world. The work extols lived-experience, blind faith, an embodied way of living, and the perception of all senses, in a purely Dionysian way. It might also be read as a speculative projection of how human bodies will evolve as technology become more and more dematerialized and implemented onto (and into) the body itself, for instance with devices such as Google Glass, robotic prosthetics, and artificial organs. It makes us think of today's discourses about technological singularity—the hypothetical moment when artificial intelligence will be as intelligent as humans, and then quickly surpass them—as

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49 According to an article published on Futurism, "Through the hive mind, everyone would be connected to everyone else telepathically, and we could all share our thoughts, memories, and even dreams with one another." Jelor Gallego and Kristin Houser "Becoming Borg: What Is a Hive Mind in Science and Could Humanity Get There?," *Futurism*, December 25, 2016, https://futurism.com/becoming-borg-what-is-a-hive-mind-in-science-and-could-humans-get-there. A recurrent trope in science fiction often uses this premise to expand on scenarios where groups of people become "possessed" or "mind controlled" by an entity that spreads into the collective mind. It also echoes real life situation, such as a recent article about how Facebook designs its platform to make it more addictive to the users as they become more and more connected. "Former Facebook and Google employees fight tech 'addiction'," BBC News, 6 February 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-42959848.

50 This article describes a bill passed in France in 2016 forcing businesses with over fifty employees to stop their staff from accessing work-related emails after working hours, citing studies linking stress levels and mental health issues to hyperconnectedness. Patricia Kosicka "After-Work Emails: Banned in France, 'A National Epidemic' in Canada," Global News Canada, May 27, 2016, https://globalnews.ca/news/2725886/after-work-emails-banned-in-france-a-national-epidemic-in-canada/

51 Megan Gibson, "Here's a Radical Way to End Vacation Email Overload," *Time*, 15 August 2014, http://time.com/3116424/daimler-vacation-email-out-of-office/

well as public personalities such as futurist Ray Kurzweil, the co-founder of Ray and Terry's Longevity Products who ingests 150 pills comprising his "immortality diet" every day in order to artificially prolong his life.[52] Shaw's works seem to be playing on fears of technology that linger in today's popular culture. Both fascinating and exalting, scientific advancements also appear as a menace—as the possible end of humanity as we know it. Just like the Quickeners and the Liminals, contemporary technology users often seem conflicted between their desire to use the latest sophisticated devices and their need to completely disconnect.

To be sure, the virtual world offers both an alternate reality, where rules and conventions of the real world do not apply, and a new world of unbounded possibilities, apart from the troubled times of the real world. As Manuel DeLanda writes: "If indeed every culture and subculture inhabits its own conceptually constructed reality, then the world and the future becomes open again. Far from being completely given in the past, the future is now unbound, the world itself becoming a text open to innumerable interpretations."[53] Subcultures both within and apart from the Internet are creating a more promising reality than the one they are living in. In the case of Shaw's characters, they aim to escape dystopian worlds. Liminals attempt to escape their upcoming dystopian future, and in *Quickeners*, the HAS-afflicted group aims to quit their present interconnected existence. Both groups undertake a quest to reach an unknown elsewhere, and believe that this transition will not happen if they stay in the mainstream world. In this, they seem to heed Elwell's suggestion that "the digital transformation of contemporary society is precipitating a crisis of transcendence marked by the convergence of the digital expression of the death of God and the death of the subject."[54] The death of the subject, an expression emerging from post-structuralist thought, is defined by Elwell as "the collapse of the modern Enlightenment ideal of a wholly autonomous and perfectly rational individual."[55] Consequently, "in today's digital culture this is being played out in a prostheticization of the self as data that ultimately compromises the identity and authority of the embodied, narratival self."[56] *Liminals*

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52 Raymond Kurzweil (b. 1948, New York) is an American futurist, writer, inventor, computer scientist, and director of a research team at Google. He is also an important figure of the Transhumanist Movement, and has written books about artificial intelligence, life extension, singularity, and various applications of technology. He is renowned for his predictions, notably about the exact year in which technological singularity will happen (the currently estimate is 2045).

53 Manuel DeLanda, "Deleuze, Diagrams and the Open-Ended Becoming of the World," in *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory and Futures*, ed. Elizabeth Grosz (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 30.

54 Elwell, 119.

55 Elwell, 79.

56 Elwell, 80.

and *Quickeners* speak volumes about Elwell's depiction of current-day society in times of crisis. It is possible to read in the works a fear of omnipresent technologies and ever-accessible knowledge. More and more, technological devices are infiltrating early twenty-first-century societies and making humans dependent on them. With social interactions and the fulfilment of most primary needs possible online, the body is relegated to a cumbersome shell for the brain. As data about an individual becomes monetizable and more valuable than the body itself, physicality is replaced by dematerialized information. In a society that gives so much importance to knowledge, Shaw's work comes as a warning against a probable dystopian future.

SECTION TWO

Dreams, Dance, and Music: A Dionysian Path to Rebirth

This section discusses the key cultural practices that the Liminals deploy as tools to achieve spiritual transcendence, namely, the use of technological devices, electronic music, and dance. Historically, these practices have been used by subcultures across the world to reach altered states of consciousness and to look at reality through a new lens. They are also all closely linked practices; for example, electronic music and dance figure dominantly in rave culture, which in turn aims to achieve alternate states of consciousness. The most significant and historically traceable tool used by the Liminals is the *Dream Machine*, whose appearance connects the preoccupations of Shaw's fictional world to those of our epoch. Used to induce a state of trance, the machine is introduced eighteen minutes into the work by a scene showing the group sitting around the device (fig. 17). It is described by the narrator as "a cylindrical object fitted with cut shapes and illuminated internally, that moves at forty-five rotations per minute, sending out patterns of eight and thirteen pulses per second that correspond to the alpha waves present in the human brain while relaxing."[57] First exhibited at the Louvre's Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1962 as part of the group exhibition *L'Objet,* the *Dream Machine* was a device prototyped in 1959 by the artist and beat poet Brion Gysin (1916–1986). The original device was a vertical cylindrical structure that contained a light bulb encircled by sheet metal which was perforated with a repeating pattern that rotated at a specific speed on a motorized base. Gysin invented it with the assistance of Ian Sommerville (1940–1976) an electronics technician and computer programmer (and Beat Hotel regular) after he experienced a state of deep relaxation provoked by a flicker effect while sitting on a bus. His aim was to create both a work of art and a medicinal device that could be commercialized.

Importantly, the *Dream Machine* is considered a major work of the Expanded Cinema movement that arose in the US in the 1950s.[58] Facilitating the spiritual experience through the means of technology was at the core of the explorations of this experimental art movement. As

57 Excerpt from the transcription of the voice-over in Jeremy Shaw's *Liminals*, 2017.

58 Mojeanne Sarah Behzadi, "Iridescent Spirituality: Early Experiments in Expanded Cinema," MA thesis, Concordia University, 2017: "The Dream Machine belongs to the expanded cinema repertoire both because of its intention to expand consciousness and because of its material incarnation, making use of light to expand on basic cinematic properties" (41).

art historian Mojeanne Sarah Behzadi argues, the work is infused with spirituality[59]: Gysin's interest in alternative worldviews and Asian philosophy ranged from the teachings of Lafayette Ronald (L. Ron) Hubbard (founder of the Church of Scientology), to spellbinding calligraphy, crystal ball, mirror gazing, and conjuring apparitions. Similarly to the ways in which Spiritualists of the nineteenth century made use of recent developments in electricity and magnetism, the trend in neurological scientific research of the 1950s using stroboscopic light and its effects on brain wavelengths inspired Gysin's design.[60] For him, writes Behzadi, "the *Dream Machine* functioned as a portal to access primordial content in waking life, and as a direct connection to the unconscious and its linguistic and visual contents."[61] Through the apparatus, users could expect to feel relaxed, calm, and on certain occasions, to enter a state of *hypnagogia* at the threshold of wakefulness and sleep. In this liminal space, one could sometimes experience visual or auditory hallucinations, lucid dreams, and other otherworldly phenomena. Both a tool for meditative contemplation and self-exploration, the *Dream Machine* was invented as a vehicle to transcend various states of consciousness.

The search for altered states and experimentation with enhancers and modifiers of sensory perceptions also motivates Shaw. As an adolescent in the 1990s, he was fascinated with popular culture and spirituality, and took drugs such as LSD, a hallucinogenic designer's drug widely used for recreational purposes in the youth culture of the 1960s. The description text on Shaw's *Liminals* included in the 2017 catalogue of the Venice Biennale reads: "Eager to translate these altered states which he himself experiences through taking LSD or experimenting with caissons of sensory isolation, the artist places himself in the wake of the mescalinian drawings by Henri Michaux and of Brion Gysin's *Dream Machine*, at the crossroads between artist, scientist, and shaman."[62] With the notable repeat reference to the shamanistic trend in contemporary art, the framework and set of cultural references constructed by Shaw are not estranged from the interests of Gysin, more than half a century ago. When asked the question: "In the '60s, cybernetic artists used stereo gear, slide projectors, strobe lights, and LSD to transform the mindset of individuals and connect them to others. Do you also consider that small-scale technologies can help us to

59 Behzadi, 3.
60 Behzadi, 45.
61 Behzadi, 51.
62 Henri Michaux (1899–1984, Namur, Belgium) was a poet, writer, and painter experimenting with mescaline, a psychedelic substance with hallucinogenic properties found in peyote and other plants in the cactaceae family. He drew his visions—and sometimes even his psychoses—while under the influence. Macel, *Viva Arte Viva: 57th International Art Exhibition: La Biennale Di Venezia*, np.

reach alternate states of consciousness?", Shaw replied, "Yes, absolutely. There are infinite ways and combinations of ways to reach an altered state—and I don't think the scale of the technology matters at all, simply the way it's being used and the desire to attain it."[63]

Shaw grew up Catholic in suburban Vancouver. His family was not especially religious, but faith and rituals have always fascinated him.[64] As a teenager he watched *Altered States* (Warner Bros., 1980), a science fiction movie by American director Ken Russell, while experimenting with LSD for the first time, and often cites this experience as pivotal in his work.[65] Shaw also has a practice of transcendental meditation, and a strong interest in the limitations of the language. For instance, the indescribability of a DMT experience,[66] a psychedelic compound notably found in ayahuasca, was explored in his work *DMT* (2004) which documented DMT consumption, asking the users to describe their experience with words to prove the inadequacy of language to express some feelings and sensations that felt "apart from this world."[67]

As part of the Venice Biennale exhibition catalogue, Shaw listed five books that inspired him in a project titled Unpacking My Library:

> David Bowie, *The Little Black Songbook*, 2011.
> Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End*, 1953.
> Terence McKenna, *The Archaic Revival*, 1991.
> Andrew Newberg, Mark Robert Waldman, *Why We Believe What We Believe: Uncovering Our Biological Need for Meaning, Spirituality and, Truth*, 2006.
> Luc Sante, *Evidence*, 1992.[68]

What this selection tells us about Shaw is that he seems fascinated both with popular culture from his formative years and spirituality. *The Little Black Songbook* is a collection of lyrics and chords of ninety songs by the English musician, actor, and pop culture icon David Bowie (1947–2016). Given the influence of music, popular culture, and science fiction in Shaw's work, the presence of a book about a cult celebrity who adopted an alien persona, publicly declared having experimented with drugs, was practising Buddhism, and whose work is filled with occult

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63 Joel Vacheron, "Jeremy Shaw: Interview," *Under The Influence* 14 (2014): 223.
64 Bianca Heuser, "Religious Ecstasy in Berlin" *Ssense,* 7 August 2018, https://www.ssense.com/en-us/editorial/culture/ecstasy-mystique.
65 Darryl Natale, "Feel the Need to Believe: Artist Jeremy Shaw's Film 'Quickeners'," *032c,* 21 September 2015, https://032c.com/2014/feel-the-need-to-believe-artist-jeremy-shaws-film-quickeners/.
66 DMT is a molecule extracted from plants which was historically used by many cultures as part of spiritual rituals. Its psychedelic effects are qualified as very intense but short-lived.
67 Jeremy Shaw, *DMT*, eight-monitor DVD installation (black and white), 2004.
68 Christine Macel, *Viva Arte Viva: 57th International Art Exhibition: La Biennale Di Venezia*, New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2017.

symbolism is not surprising.[69] Interviewed by the National Gallery of Canada, Shaw stated that he grew up heavily influenced by David Bowie.[70] Arthur C. Clarke (1917–2008) was a prominent science fiction writer and his book *Childhood's End* is about aliens invading Earth. Terence Kemp McKenna (1946–2000) was an American West Coast psychonaut, author, mystic, and lecturer interested in psilocybin mushrooms in relation to human evolution.[71] The co-authored work *Why We Believe What We Believe: Uncovering Our Biological Need for Meaning, Spirituality and, Truth* explores the biological effects of spirituality in the human brain. Finally, Luc Sante's *Evidence* presents evidence photographs taken between 1914 and 1918 by the New York City police department, whose aesthetics recalls the imaginary small impoverished town conjured up in the opening sequence of *Quickeners*. Each of the works listed resonate with spirituality and aesthetic or popular culture, and these themes are represented in his artistic work. Music is one instance of an element from pop culture recycled in *Liminals*.

German avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928–2007) described the human body as a sophisticated instrument of perception which electronic music can affect, opening up the possibility that the mind can be influenced by music. Stockhausen, a controversial character claiming to be an extraterrestrial from the planet Sirius, who fell into public disgrace after declaring that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were the greatest works of art, considered his own music to be highly spiritual. In a text discussing the relationship between composers and performers, he declares:

> Let us set ourselves the highest goal: the attainment of a consciousness that puts all mankind at stake (…). Now we are in a period in which the superconsciousness has become so strong in a few people that they are close to becoming higher forms of life (…). We musicians are given a great power to ignite in other humans the fires of desire to exceed themselves. Let us not misuse this power.[72]

Pursuing this call to action, Stockhausen talks about vibrations and frequencies, which, when carefully attuned and played at the right moment, causes the body of the musician to "vibrate."

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69 For a period of his career, David Bowie practiced magic and injected occult references into his music. The first two lines of the song "Quicksand" from the album *Hunky Dory* (RCA Records, 1971) read: "I'm closer to the Golden Dawn / Immersed in Crowley's uniform." This is a direct reference to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn which was devoted to the study of magic and the occult, and to which English occultist Aleister Crowley was closely associated.

70 Becky Rynor, "An Interview with Jeremy Shaw, Winner of the 2016 Sobey Art Award," National Gallery of Canada, 3 November 2016, www.gallery.ca/magazine/artists/an-interview-with-jeremy-shaw-winner-of-the-2016-sobey-art-award.

71 Also referred to as "magic mushrooms," and often used as a recreational drug for their psychedelic qualities.

72 Robert P. Morgan, "Stockhausen's Writings on Music," *The Musical Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (Jan. 1975): 13.

This vibration creates a field which in turns gets the body of the listener to vibrate in unison, and therefore attain a common consciousness. Certainly, *Liminals* is also imbued with this idea and uses various genres of music to facilitate access to altered states of consciousness. A wide selection of world music is incorporated within the narrative. Foreign percussive beats are played in the studio space and can be heard by the Liminals who dance to it. The daunting, repetitive rhythm immerses the dancers, who perform in equally repetitive motions, in a state of trance. Subsequently, different tracks of various human and non-human origins in multiple rhythms are played. In the seconds before the moment of transcendence, an extra-diegetic music begins. This ambient electronic track, made of synthesizers and digital sound effects, is the composition of "There in Spirit," a musical collaboration between Shaw and Todd Shillington (Konrad Black), of which Shaw says: "It all operates along a kind of New Romantic Science Fiction trajectory—like, soap opera techno."[73] At the climax of the storyline, when the Liminals are about to transcend, it becomes louder and more intense. Amplifying the emotion of the scene and setting the slow rhythm, both repetitive and poignant, with mystical otherworldly overtones, the music evokes a contemplative and whimsical atmosphere to the work's finale. Referencing New Age movements and science fiction movies, the ending seems to subvert the romanticized, overly emotionally charged moments found in mainstream cinema.

The depictions of dance in *Liminals* share many aspects of rave and psytrance culture, especially in the context of its narrative. In raves, techno music is said to help induce a state of trance to the adepts. While no study can confirm this conclusion, it has been proven that music can, in certain situations, help maintain and prolong a state of ecstasy or trance.[74] In the context of raves, music is an important factor but other circumstances are crucial to consider when examining how alternate states of consciousness are achieved. Raves often take place at night and last for hours, provoking the physical exhaustion of ravers. They also often but not always involve the use of psychedelic drugs and other enhancers. Thus, lighting, a physical state of fatigue, and drugs are regularly at play in the induction and maintenance of an ecstatic state. There is also a bodily performance that takes place on the dance floor, which becomes a stage for the raver to unleash a "primal" and spiritual energy. Responding to the stimulating sensory environment in which they are immersed, and possibly to the substance(s) they ingested, ravers

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73 Vacheron, 218.

74 Scott R. Hutson, "Technoshamanism: Spiritual Healing in the Rave Subculture," *Popular Music & Society* 23, no. 3 (1999): 61.

are invited to participate in this performance. As Nelson, quoted in Psyence Vedava points out: "The theatricality of the event enrolls everyone as an 'experiencer,' their role transcending that of being a passive member of an audience, spectator or spect-actor."[75] Their bodily involvement is thus necessary to reach a state of catharsis or ecstasy. This ecstatic state becomes the main action in Shaw's work. Dance and subcultures are recurrent themes in many of his pieces. His 2001 video *Morning Has Broken* sets footage of young people exiting a rave in a warehouse in Vancouver to Cat Stevens' song of the same name. Another work by Shaw, *Variation FQ* (2013), depicts trans voguer Leiomy Maldonado performing movements on a black backdrop with stark lighting. As a musician and international DJ, Shaw makes music for people to dance to and he is fascinated by how the movements of the body can incite a state of trance, cathartic and emancipatory.

The trope of rebirth is also a common factor in both raves and what the Liminals are doing. Rebirth is present in the narrative in how the group seeks to leave their body to exist under a new form. The myth of Greek god Dionysus is also a story about rebirth. Zeus, the Greek king of gods, used a human disguise to cheat on his wife Hera with Semele, a mortal woman. Hera learns about his husband's affair while Semele is pregnant and tries to convince her that Zeus is not the father of the baby. Made doubtful by Hera's lie, Semele insists that Zeus reveals himself to her without his costume. Despite his resistance, he agrees to Semele's request but kills her while doing so because the gods are too powerful to be looked at by mere mortals in their divine form. Zeus then rescues his unborn son from certain death by sewing him into his thigh, and "gives birth" to him a few months later. It is thus unclear whether baby Dionysus is a god or a demi-god. He is believed to have been born twice, a clear association with rebirth.[76] Dionysus has a rather extraordinary life: Given away by his father, he is kidnapped and sold as a slave a few times, but fortunately he is also terribly attractive, incredibly strong, and could turn into animals such as a lion or a dolphin, making his life enjoyable after all as the god of wine, ritual madness, fertility, theatre, and religious ecstasy. Hence, Dionysus encompasses themes of rebirth, intoxication, and religious ecstasy, all ideas relevant to rave culture but also to Shaw's *Liminals*. Rebirth constitutes the goals of the protagonists who aim at transcending their current state of being to be "reborn" in a new form. This process is fundamentally spiritual and is accompanied

75 R. Nelson quoted in Psyence Vedava, 182.
76 For complete summary of the myth, see "Dionysus," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dionysus, accessed 19 August 2018.

with ecstasy. Intoxication and the arts, music, and dance are tools used to achieve this spiritual process. Importantly, however, the rave setting, writes Hutson, "matches the sensory experience of being in the womb. Raves are dark, humid (due to mist makers), and warm (due to sweating dancers), while the dance beat replicates the mother's heartbeat."[77] This description, like the atmosphere in the Liminals' studio, incorporates the idea that technology—here the electronic heartbeat and the mist maker—merges with bodies to provoke a transformation in the same way that synthetic DNA and tools (mirror ball, stroboscope, etc.) combine with the carnal bodies of the Liminals.

Shaw's work brings into consideration how in the 1990s, electronic dance music has given birth to a new understanding of certain binary relations: humans and machines, art and technology, ancient rituals and neo-ritualism, ancestral and postmodern shamans, physical and virtual environments.[78] More than a musical genre, it became for many adepts a way of living, intertwined with spirituality and pagan practices. The ritual of going to a rave party very much resembles the shamanistic ritual in its form and intentionality. Often held in secret, remote, or hidden locations, they exist relatively apart from everyday time and space. Both happen at night, reuniting a community centred on similar beliefs, and involve the repetition of percussive beats guided by a shaman-DJ and flickers of light, whether it is artificial, like a strobe light, or natural, as a bonfire. Scott R. Hutson proposes that rituals aim at healing; others see this process as a spiritual quest similar to gnosis or a temporary escape from the disenchanted routine of a post-modern society. Vedava writes:

> The common underlying biogenetic structures of shamanism and raves involve: The social functions of the ritual; the effects of dance and music as systems for social bonding and emotional communication; and the effects on consciousness that produce alterations of emotions, identity and consciousness and personal healing.[79]

Davis adds that for certain subcultures, echoes of tribalism are inherently part of this experience as Rainbow families mimic and appropriate faux-Native American rituals, while "modern primitives" adorn themselves with Gothic piercings, African earplugs, and Maori tattoos. By appropriating the vocabulary and aesthetic of the "tribal," rave culture aims to "return to nature,"

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77 Hutson, 65.

78 See Psyence Vedava, "Exploring Psytrance as Technognosis: A Hypothesis of Participation," in Emìlia Simaìo, *Exploring Psychedelic Trance and Electronic Dance Music in Modern Culture* (Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, 2015).

79 Vedava, "Exploring Psytrance," 173.

or to a pure state of being, pre-civilization and pre-colonization. Their ways of doing so are without a doubt highly problematic, as will be discussed in Section Four, and in addition, they are contradictory, as electronic music and chemical designer drugs are the products of everything they dismiss. Rave and psytrance scenes combine retro-futurism, free thinking, and technology, but also encompass transglobal dimensions. In this potpourri of influences, aesthetic elements and spiritual practices from a wide variety of non-Western cultures are appropriated and used as tools to achieve spiritual ecstasy, or merely to create a suitable "ambiance" to facilitate it. This "salad" of ritual and religious appropriation also constitutes the basis of the new mythology created by Shaw in his works. The ultimate goal, through the use of the above-mentioned tools, is salvation through transcendence.

SECTION THREE

A Hauntological Time Travelling in Jeremy Shaw's work

On a fundamental level, the means to deploy these tools as the solution to the problem of extinction in Shaw's works is through time travel. Here Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology and Mark Fisher's take on nostalgia are useful analytical tools with which to examine Shaw's *Quickeners* and *Liminals*. Fearing extinction, Liminals aim to travel through time, both in the past and the future, a movement that conveys both the feeling of nostalgia for something that has been lost but also anticipation for a future that is entirely unknown, and thus is ultimately a violent rejection of the present. Considering both *Quickeners* and *Liminals* in this section helps to identify reoccurring strategies used by Shaw throughout his practice and the different results obtained by either utilizing the archives or mimicking an aesthetic from the past.

The term "hauntology" is a portmanteau word for "haunting" and "ontology" and a term coined by Derrida in his 1993 book *Spectres de Marx* [*Specters of Marx*]. This influential essay is situated in the lineage of Derrida's deconstruction theory, which attempts to expose how language influences the meaning of words. Deconstruction is about understanding that words and their origins are historical, political, and cultural, and therefore, one must be aware of their complexity. The publication of *Specters of Marx* gave birth to the "spectral turn," an expression coined by Roger Luckhurst in 1999.[80] The "spectral turn" designates a shift within the academy, as the figure of the ghost ceased to be perceived as a literal and esoteric entity and became a tool for theoretical analysis in the humanities and social sciences following the publication and translation into English of Derrida's book. Derrida defines hauntology as a logic of the haunting. Central to this logic is the figure of the ghost, which "performs" the haunting, by being neither present nor absent, neither alive nor dead. Derrida's ghost haunts, but it is not present. Though absent, it does nevertheless have an effect and impact. This ghostly entity belongs to either the past or the future, but also lives in the present. It is not bound to place and escapes the notion of time as it is known; it bends chronological linearity.

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80 Roger Luckhurst, "The Contemporary London Gothic and the Limits of the 'Spectral turn'," *Textual Practice* 16, no. 3 (2010): 535.

I argue that ghosts, after Derrida's formulation, haunt Shaw's series, proposing that the haunting takes place in two ways: first, in the formal properties of the artist's cinema in *Quickeners* where the use of archival material still affects the perception of the work; and, second, how nostalgia is pervasive in the narratives of both *Quickeners* and *Liminals*. Furthermore, I contend that the original footage appropriated by Shaw for *Quickeners* acts as a ghost from the past that haunts both these works; the selected images do so because of their persistent presence. For this section, I examine *Quickeners* and *Liminals* separately, since the latter does not make use of found footage.

As mentioned in the introduction, *Quickeners* uses footage of the ethnographic documentary *Holy Ghost People* (Thistle Films, 1967), directed and narrated by American filmmaker Peter Adair (1943–1996), which is now in the public domain. The original documentary uses a *cinéma-vérité* aesthetic to follow Pentecostal Christians at the Scrabble Creek Holiness Church in Scrabble Creek, West Virginia during one of their rituals. Pentecostal Christians put emphasis on one's personal experience with God, and believe in the descent of the Holy Ghost among adepts through the performance of rituals. Their practices, which are largely rooted in a literal reading of the concluding verses of the "great commission" found in the Gospel of Mark (chapter 16), includes snake handling, speaking in tongues, dances, prayers in various styles, gatherings presided over by a pastor multiple times a week, and chants.[81] At one point during a sermon in the film, the pastor invites his audience to ignore the camera in the room, thus acknowledging the presence of the crew. The movie concludes with images of scattered groups of people praying, dancing, chanting, and manipulating copperhead snakes.

Key to accessing these fictional characters is how they are depicted as fragmented. Their words and testimonies have been erased in the same way that scents, sounds, and touches of a deceased person slowly vanish from memory. The vision of the images juxtaposed with the disappearance of the speech creates a strange fragmentation of the original document. Just as the physical body is detached from the ethereal, supernatural apparition of the ghost, a similar phenomenon occurs with the archives, which produces a striking effect of "something wrong." The familiar aesthetic of BBC documentary films from the 1960s or 1970s might seem out of place in a contemporary art gallery. Conversely, the highly technological discourse of the

81 "And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover." See Mark 16: 17-18. Translation: Authorized/King James Bible.

narration, which uses a vocabulary from "the future," creates tension. Linking this idea to the work, the fragmentation of the archive from its original purpose also confers a strange aura onto the work. The realism of the scenes that are depicted clashes with the science fiction narrative of the voice-over, leaving the viewer wondering what the meaning of this experience is.

Citing Nicole Brenez and Pip Chodorov, Pierre Rannou writes that the use of archival material is said to "autonomize the images, favour direct intervention on the film as material, and become attached to different sites (layers of emulsion, for instance) and forms of editing."[82] Quoting French philosopher Philippe Petit, Rannou adds: "We are living at a time of terrible doubts about artistic work, scientific discovery, religious feeling (…). These doubts are expressed through a cultural recycling so laden with meaning that we fail to grasp the form of the recycling itself."[83] Following Petit's thought, the very process of recycling film is itself a form of doubt and has meaning, as the choice of this technique is not coincidental. Found footage, according to Petit, is the expression of doubt towards art, science, and religion. These observations seem highly relevant in this discussion of the aesthetic outcome of *Quickeners,* which is constructed using archival material. Interviewed by *FAD Magazine*, Shaw describes his interest in "working with outmoded mediums, documentary subjects and visual effects—attempting to make succinct, solid works that as such throw the date of production and validity of content into question."[84] Indeed, his choice of medium—the archive—most adequately supports his content.

In contrast, *Liminals* imitates the style of the 1960s and 1970s videos in 16-mm format, thus confounding the date of production. Shaw has created the images, but I argue that they are haunted by a style characteristic of a technology that is now obsolete, and are therefore imbued with a profound nostalgia. The revival of this aesthetic might be the result of a profound attachment for a specific way of doing things, or motivated by the belief that something has been lost: purity, primal rawness, and innocence. The ethnomusicologist Tamara E. Livingston, writing about popular music, explains that "music revivals are generally middle-class phenomena that construct a collective identity for individuals disaffected with aspects of contemporary life."[85] I propose that there are parallels between music revivalism and Shaw's work. The process

82 Pierre Rannou, "Reconfiguring Found Footage Film," *esse* 64 (Fall 2008): n.p., http://esse.ca/en/reconfiguring-found-footage-film, accessed 15 May 2018.
83 Rannou, n.p.
84 Westall, n.p.
85 Tamara E. Livingston, cited in Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), 206.

of shooting in 16-mm film, in tandem with the digital glitch aesthetic at the end of the work, situates *Liminals* in a broader artistic movement of nostalgia for obsolete mediums that is still present today. The most recent version of the movement replicates software failures, glitches, and format compression associated with VHS tapes and the early age of the Internet. The use of an aesthetic from a previous era helps to convey a feeling of hope and utopia which is linked with technology from that time. A throwback to the epoch of home movies, at the dawn of the commercialization of personal computers—with IBM launching their first model in 1981—and before the dissemination of the Internet, the VHS aesthetic recalls a moment when technology was imperfect; fallible but full of potential. Shaw's use of this dated aesthetic brings us back to a time imbued with optimism and faith in technology.

Momentarily leaving aside questions concerning form, I would like to bring into consideration that the ghost is also present as an inherent part of the narrative. In *Quickeners,* quantum humans in a relatively near future speak so-called archaic languages, which are in fact dialogues in English that have been digitally altered, and perform ancestral rituals borrowed from the past in order to transcend their physical limitations. In *Liminals*, an altruistic group of humans in the future uses antiquated tools borrowed from the past (which is actually the present in 2018) to save humankind from potential extinction in the near future. These storylines certainly present a confusing chronology. Referring to nostalgia for a lost future, Fisher writes that "the disappearance of the future meant the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live."[86] Similarly, the 2010 Guggenheim exhibition *Haunted: Contemporary Photography/Video/Performance* curated by Jennifer Blessing proposed that contemporary art seems haunted by apparitions reanimated through the use of dated stylistic devices, subject matter, and technologies, thus embodying a form of longing for an otherwise lost past.[87] By definition, nostalgia refers to the past and has a positive connotation, in the sense that something agreeable is now over. One can feel nostalgia for the expectation and anticipation of a promising future, unspoiled, now out of reach. For instance, an adult remembering their childhood dreams can feel nostalgic for a time when they thought that becoming a monarch, a rockstar, or owning a legendary creature were still achievable life goals. The new future that replaced the old one

86 Fisher, 16.
87 Jennifer Blessing et al., *Haunted: Contemporary Photography, Video, Performance* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2010).

appears less desirable, in continuity with the present. Through their use of past languages and rituals, the quantum humans in *Quickeners* display a form of nostalgia for how things were before quantification. Oddly enough, they are convinced that those elements from the past—rituals, languages, practices—will lead them to a different future that the one that will most likely occur otherwise, without their intervention. By provoking evolution, is it as though they want to skip through a few "futures" to jump to a later one, which will perhaps resemble more the past. A similar reflection can be made about *Liminals.* The characters in both works seem truly dissatisfied with their current present (our current future) and attempt what looks like redemptive time-travelling in order to realign the future. In this way, they express nostalgia for a lost future, though it is not necessarily the same. They also suggest to the viewers that their present situation might get even worse, and that there might still be time to realign their trajectory toward a better future.

The "ancient humans" are not alive but they continue to affect future humans through what Fisher calls the "virtual agency of the no longer,"[88] using Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (Warner Bros., 1980) as an example. The plot revolves around a man and his family who move into an isolated hotel during winter, where tragic events from decades earlier have negative, harmful impacts on their stay. Phantoms of the past appear, and victims and murderers turn their retreat into a nightmare. Forces of the *no longer* are at play in this scenario: they are no longer present but not yet absent. In Shaw's work, humankind as we know it is extinct, replaced by quantum humans. However, evolution seems to have taken a wrong turn for the post-quantification people, and their aim is to return to an earlier stage. The ghost of ancestral humanity is still present, seducing them and appealing to them in the same way that haunted houses never want their visitors to leave. The narrative of evolution keeps repeating, just as the ghosts keep visiting.

Not only does the past still haunt the narratives of these two stories, but the spectral future also makes an apparition. Quoting Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Derrida comments: "The time is out of joint."[89] In Shaw's video works, space—but especially time—collapses. The impact that one temporality has upon the other is multidimensional and highly intricate. Fisher notes that "the future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present,

88 Fisher, 21.
89 Derrida, 20.

conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production. What hauntological music mourns is less the failure of a future to transpire—the future as actuality—than the disappearance of this effective virtuality."[90] This might explain why Shaw's conflicted temporalities are so hard to grasp, and tricky to deconstruct.

In this section I have explained how haunting takes place in both *Quickeners* and *Liminals*: in the former through the use of found footage, and in the latter by appropriating the aesthetics of obsolete technology. I have explored how time—past, present, and future—collapses within the narrative of the works. Finally, I have illustrated how Shaw's works incorporate the idea of nostalgia. In the next section, I explain that the figure of the ghost also appears through atavism.

90 Fisher, 16.

SECTION FOUR

Invoking Atavism in *Liminals* and *Quickeners*

The plots of Shaw's *Liminals* and *Quickeners* are highly complex, and bring a dilemma that is closely connected to controversial notions of atavism, technological primitivism, and post-cinematic atavism. The aim of this section is to identify these concepts within the works and to illustrate how they contribute to conveying a dystopian vision of the future. American literature scholar Dana Seitler traces the origins of the word atavism in the Latin kinship term *atavus*, which means "great-grandfather's grandfather."[91] Atavism designates a condition of "resemblance to grandparents or more remote ancestors rather than to parents."[92] Seitler also includes secondary definitions such as a "tendency to reproduce the ancestral type" and the "recurrence of the disease or constitutional symptoms of an ancestor after the intermission of one or more generations."[93] The term atavism encompasses the idea that the self is inherently affected by a lineage, or a genealogy of ancestors which goes back further than biological parents or grandparents. It also suggests that traits from remote ancestors (diseases, symptoms, physical characteristics) can resurface at any moment in an individual, no matter how many generations separate them from the said trait: "The body, atavism indicates, is reversible, changing, and susceptible to decline; it is affected by an endless cycle of decomposition and recomposition, futurity and return."[94] Atavism thus challenges the idea that evolution is continuous and linear, and rather suggests that it is an unstable and unpredictable process. In *Quickeners*, atavism is defined by the narrator as "a complex affliction which inexplicably resurrects certain traits or societal characteristics of distant ancestors often not seen in centuries."[95] In this scenario, the reoccurring behaviours of the past associated with faith include chants, dances, prayers, snake handling, and the resurfacing of an antiquated language. The "past" that is reoccurring is actually our present. Their peers perceive individuals affected by HAS as anomalies; they adopt irrational behaviours without any apparent reasons. To humans who are not afflicted by the syndrome, they

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91 Dana Seitler, *Atavistic Tendencies: The Culture of Science in American Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 2.
92 Dana Seitler, 2.
93 Dana Seitler, 2.
94 Seitler, 7.
95 Shaw, *Quickeners*, 1m30s.

are the equivalent of an embarrassing past that needs to be forgotten. In *Liminals*, the resurrection of dormant faith cells in the dancers' brains constitutes atavism because—as far as this community knows—it is a common ancestral trait that has simply not yet appeared for a number of generations, resulting in their current predicament of imminent extinction. Liminals invoke the process of "atavism," or a regression in evolution, to mean that they want to return to a pre-existent biological stage in order to survive. Hence, both works explicitly convey the idea of atavism as part of their narratives, but also suggest that humans are perpetually dissatisfied with their condition, whether they live forever or face extinction.

Seitler explains that while we are currently obsessed with invoking and differentiating our present from a persistent and reoccurring past, it comes back in the present atavistic traits as ghosts perform a haunting. Citing examples of the popularity of re-enactment culture (restaging wars, famous journeys, and obsolete cultural rituals), she argues that the desire for a connection to the past is strong. However, she adds that in instances of trauma, the past can be painful or embarrassing to remember—in such cases, atavism, similarly to the ghost, is undesirable.

American scholar Russ Castronovo explains that atavism is often associated with primitivism, for it points to traits belonging to the past or to an earlier self. For instance, behaviours that are qualified as "animal" or "primitive" and bear association with the natural or the animal are only tolerated when they remain concealed within the invisible realm of the present body. However, when individuals exhibit traits or behaviours that are considered reminiscent of an outdated time, they are a reminder of an earlier moment in humanity, and can therefore constitute a menace for the family and even the nation. American eugenicist Lothrop Stoddard (1883–1950) declared that there was an "Under Man" or "primitive animality" concealed within every man, even the noblest ones, but that the lower strata of society were dominated by this Under Man, who "took over," thus leading to depravity and crime.[96] This theory is based on the evolutionary discourse that humans evolved from animals, and entails a class bias to the idea of primitivism. If all humans came from animals, rich people were better able to hide their "atavism" than the poor, who were more inclined to degenerate behaviour. The

96 "Each of us has within him an "Under Man," that primitive animality which is the heritage of our human, and even prehuman, past. This primitive animality potentially present even in the noblest natures, continuously dominates the lower social strata, especially the pauper, criminal, and degenerate elements—civilization's 'inner barbarians.' Now, when society's dregs boil to the top . . . in virtually every community there is a distinct resurgence of the brute and the savage, and the atavistic trend thus becomes practically universal." Lothrop Stoddard, *The Revolt against Civilization: The Menace of the Under Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), 303–304.

resurgence of the Under Man meant the implosion of the "modern world" and the return to a primitive existence. Castronovo cites as an example retrogressive animalism, a pseudoscience popular in the early 1900s that claimed to identify animal traits in "degenerate" persons.[97] Adepts of the movement argued, for instance, that sexual perverts had apelike brows. In this example, displaying apelike features constituted an atavistic regression. Education or "civilization" was seen as a cure against the resurgence of inner atavism. Not only was class an indicator of atavistic tendencies, but race was also used to "classify" groups of people. These theories, developed by white Europeans and Americans, also happened to establish that non-white people were more at risk of seeing their Under Man resurface. One 1898 book compared drawings of a chimpanzee's head with those of a "coloured criminal youth" and a "member of the Caucasic race," and invited the reader to see for themselves that the inclination of the white man's head had a more "evolved" angle than the black man's, and was therefore further from the possibility of atavistic regression.[98] Seitler explains that "if eugenics was the practice, atavism was the theory."[99] The fear of the Under Man taking over was latent, and juxtaposed with a fear of "the other"—whether racialized, of a different social class, or disabled. This was a menace to the American and Eurocentric "civilized world" and its privileges.

Economists Mike Saren and Norah Campbell write that atavism has historically been used as a biological and political discourse to account for "the other" as people who exhibit evolutionary traits of a former time but still exist in the present. This "other" can appear as an ancestor now regarded as primitive; an underdeveloped version of the self from which to escape. "The primitive" and "the technological," they explain, were considered binaries through the American and Eurocentric lens, where technology was conceived as inherent to the Western world and primitivism was associated with the "other." The presence or absence of technologies in a society was seen as a marker of its degree of "backwardness." Citing Scott McQuire, Saren and Campbell continue: "Technology is [thought of as] something that comes from the West and does something to other people in other places, such as the 'Third World'—a framework which,

97 Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), xiii.
98 Eugene Solomon Talbot, *Degeneracy, Its Causes, Signs, and Results* (London: Walter Scott Ltd., 1898), 182–183.
99 Seitler, 24.

even when well-intentioned, denies both agency and contemporaneity to the 'other'."[100] In this way, racist and essentialist discourses were supported by pseudo-scientific observations. Technology played a part in disseminating theories of eugenics and atavistic regression; for example, the advent of medical photography helped to circulate images to a broader public, and was used to display the atavistic body. In a photograph, Seitler writes: "the body is frozen in time: secured in the past, quarantined from the present. At the same time, not unlike the atavistic body that it so often displayed, the medical photograph is a site where the past recurs in such a way as to reinforce and reinvent meanings of and in the present."[101] Hence, this temporal technology acted as a container for atavism: as a way to exhibit it and educate the public without spillage, a role that is quite similar to the claims of the ethnographic documentary film genre.

The question can be posed as to whether *Quickeners* and *Liminals* perpetuate or challenge the racist prejudices often associated with atavism given the ethnographic redemption documentary served as primary source material in the making of *Quickeners*, and the genre resuscitated in *Liminals*. Ethnographic documentaries are often about the anthropological Other, for example in the context of this discussion, racialized minorities or marginalized religious communities. However, I argue *Liminals* mimics or borrows codes from the genre to suggest that a tension is at play precisely when the lines between the pathologizing of race and the pathologizing of religion are blurred. In this way, Shaw creates a productive reflection between the two ideologies, raising questions clearly relevant in today's political climate and its many contradictions. As discussed, there is a link between atavism and eugenics. Further, Pentecostal practices from the southern United States have long been influenced by Black spiritual practices, although congregations quickly reverted to societal norms governing racial segregation.[102] Exploiting the possible slippages for audiences to reduce real-life communities perceived to be similar to the Liminals to being merely a throwback one-dimensional ethnographic case study—

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100 Scott McQuire, "Technology," *Theory, Culture and Society* 23, nos. 2–3 (2006): 253–265. Quoted in Norah Campbell and Mike Saren, "The Primitive, Technology and Horror: A Posthuman Biology," *Ephemera Journal* 10, no. 2 (2010): 152–176.

101 Seitler, 26.

102 In Los Angeles in 1906, a time of rampant racist segregation, Azusa Street Revival was a historic revival meeting led by a Black pastor, William J. Seymour. This is historically considered as a key moment in the spread of Pentecostalism in the United States. See Marne L. Campbell, "The Newest Religious Sect Has Started in Los Angeles: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and the Origins of the Pentecostal Movement, 1906-1913," *The Journal of African American History* 95, no.1 (2010), 1–25 and Christine A. Scheller "Pentecoastalism's Neglected Black History" *Huffington Post,* 23 March 2012. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/christine-a-scheller/pentecostalisms-neglected-black-history_b_1222468.html, accessed 28 August 2018.

without working with or within these communities—Shaw's films navigates through his imagined future world in a way that exacerbates the underlying tensions, contradictions, and distortions.

The co-authored article *The Problem of the Ethnographic Real* proposes that any activity of perceiving, recording and thinking is fraught with distortion.[103] Making a movie is a creative process imbued with subjectivity which is present in all the stages of the filmmaking process, and claiming that the genre is based on facts and scientific data presupposes a certain form of neutrality. However, the choice of what is observed, how it is observed, and how the conclusions are exposed depends on inductivism, and oftentimes, generalizations. Historically, ethnographic films have depicted white American or European scholars and scientists documenting racialized communities, sometimes in remote rural regions. This highly problematic genre typically presents an outsider from a different culture who pretends to understand the nuances, complexities, and specificities of a group after just a brief period of observation. This relates to atavism because of the ways in which these groups—Indigenous people, or so-called "pre-contact" communities—are presented as more primitive than white Europeans. The challenges faced by the ethnographer, or ethnographic filmmaker, are multiple: to understand what they are witnessing, to adequately describe it in their own specialized academic terms, and to render their observations understandable to their public, which entails not only communicating an idea from a different cultural realm, but also an act of vulgarization in order to make the academic jargon accessible to a broader audience. In the end, an ethnographic film is not much different from a work of fiction.

In Shaw's works, the narratives and the insertions of interviews suppose the presence of a team of documentary filmmakers intruding on a marginal community to film its activity. The subjects are captured in a specific moment in time, suggesting that their identities and experiences are not evolving, or at least not quickly enough. Similarly to medical photography, their image is mediated by technology, distancing and preserving the viewer. In both *Quickeners* and *Liminals*, interviews are conducted with the subjects. However, since their language is unintelligible for viewers who are not afflicted by HAS or under the influence of Machine DNA, their words are translated into English, appearing at the bottom of the screen as they speak. The

103 Ian Charles Jarvie et al., "The Problem of the Ethnographic Real," *Current Anthropology* 24, no. 3 (1983): 313.

contemporary viewer has to rely on the translator's personal interpretation of the meaning of the words as well as their ability to adequately convey the significance of the terms without deforming them. An added level of complexity comes from the fact that both Quickeners and Liminals resemble humans of today, suggesting that "we" ourselves could become the subject of ethnographic redemption documentaries in the future: embarrassing ancestors who might re-emerge through scientific experiments or spiritual summonings to menace the established order of future societies.

In the context of this discussion, Shaw's works can also be seen as using an aesthetic of technological primitivism, which designates the ways in which the primitive is used in discourses of high technology. Campbell and Saren observe that many subcultures deemed highly technological, such as rave culture and "New Age" science, have incorporated elements from so-called primitive cultures—like shamanism, esotericism, hermeticism, occultism, and mythology—into their philosophies. Technological primitivism is the appropriation of technologies considered to belong to cultures deemed primitive by the so-called West in order to fit certain stylistic fantasies or spiritual endeavours. In *Liminals*, there are direct associations with technological primitivism. The "altruist periphery" group of Liminals could be seen as a cyborg subculture, in the sense that they exist at the margins of humanity, and that their bodies incorporate non-biological components. Situated in the future, the group makes use of technologies from the 1830s (Joseph Plateau's stroboscope) the 1920s (the mirrored ball), and the 1950s (Brion Gysin's Dream Machine). Even though they were invented at different times, all these devices are elements of current-day popular culture. Therefore, Liminals imitate New Age and rave culture movements of our time, which are considered primitive cultures in the future, in that they appropriate elements of these cultures while belonging to a highly technological environment. By juxtaposing the idea of primitivism with our current time, Shaw demonstrates that each time represents the "primitive" era of a future time yet to come, and therefore has the potential to become atavistic. This adds a layer of complexity to the historical conception of atavism by confronting the viewers with the idea of how they could be perceived in the future.

Discussing Shaw's work by thinking through the theoretical field of atavism has been explored though the terms "atavism" and "technological primitivism." This inevitably brings up another key figure: the "posthuman." Arguing for the creation of a posthuman biology, Campbell and Saren explain how technology is simultaneously seen as salvation and a threat, as magical

and rational, by paraphrasing French sociologist Jean Baudrillard: "In his eyes, humans unconsciously produce technologies that are partly dysfunctional, and hence will never be infallible, because humans are terrified of the potential infallibility of the technological. We could call such an imaginary 'techno-anxiety'."[104] Hence, a fear of being superseded by technology pushes humans to make it imperfect, but paradoxically, the desire for progress and fetishization of technological devices push us to keep creating them. These contradictions, they argue, are observed through three tropes often conflated within contemporary visual creation (advertisement, films, literature): the primitive, technology, and horror.[105]

I propose that a similar tension is at play in both *Quickeners* and *Liminals*. The groups depicted in the works are posthumans, partly biological and partly technological.[106] Campbell and Saren describe the fluid and transitive nature of the posthuman identity—often represented as avatars, replicants, androids, androgynes, cyborgs, clones, or zombies— by associating it with "almost-not-quite-ontologies" situated in "the becoming."[107] The figure of the posthuman is inherent to the idea of the extinction of humanity. It encompasses both horror and hope—the idea of an end but the aim for eternity—permitted by technology, evoking the humanistic taboos of previous eras and reflecting the underlying fears of contemporary society. Today, cryogenics, longevity pills, and life extension through medical innovations point to the figure of the posthuman, a hypothetical entity that is becoming more and more plausible. By proposing a speculative avenue for this figure, Shaw exploits a contemporary anxiety linked with this cyborg-like figure.

In both cinematic narratives, the posthuman communities use technologies and science, either by gathering information on archaic humanity through the Hive, a dematerialized bank of information in *Quickeners*, or by injecting synthetic DNA into their brain in *Liminals*. They use

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104 Campbell and Saren, 153.
105 Campbell and Saren, 152.
106 Many theorists have studied the concept of posthumans. My use of the term here acknowledges Donna Haraway's cyborg as a "beta" version of the posthuman but the context of this study does not call for a politicized connotation—see Haraway's 1985 essay "The Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181. My use of the term is closer to N. Katherine Hayles' definition using four principles, beginning with: "First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition (…)," which I understand as closely linked with advancements in information technologies, and more suited to the current discussion. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2–3.
107 Campbell and Saren, 156.

technology in order to escape it, and return to an earlier stage of evolution. They are liminal figures: positioned on the edges, between the biological and the artificial, shaped by the past and borrowing from it, but also aiming to evolve and to transcend the present time. At the core of the narrative is the concept of metamorphosis, a departing from one form to the other, suggesting a non-fixed identity like the posthuman described by Campbell and Saren. Primitivism and technology are present within the works, and used to exacerbate our current conflicted relationships with technological innovations. The concept of horror, however, still needs to be discussed.

I argue that the horror in Shaw's work resides in the idea of extinction. This concept, which is at the core of the narrative of *Liminals,* is worth exploring in relation to atavism. After all, it is the possibility of extinction that motivates the Liminals to invoke the process of atavism. Cohen and Colebrook distinguish three forms of extinctions. The first is human extinction—the fact that humans will become extinct. The second is non-human extinction—the fact that we cause other non-human extinctions. Finally, the third is the fact that we extinguish what renders us human.[108] They argue that in the context of the twenty-first century, the idea of extinction in all its declinations is imminent, and that contemporary humans are getting used to this threat. This idea is becoming so ubiquitous that it is losing its intensity and the power of fear to instill collective action. Discourses about climate change and natural catastrophes, or the eventuality of global warfare due to political conflict, have become assimilated and processed as certainties and must be lived with on a daily basis.[109]

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose that art often considers the relation between humanity and extinction, "for it is the nature of the art object to exist beyond its originating intention, both intimating a people not yet present."[110] There is always the possibility that the life of a work of art surpasses that of its artist. Therefore, this dissociation between the artist's humanity and the object makes it a good vehicle to depict the idea of extinction. They add:

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108 Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2014), 13.
109 See, for example, US President Donald Trump's denial of climate change as expressed on Twitter in 2012: "The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive" (@realdonaldtrump, 16 November 2012, 3:15 pm), a sentiment which has been reiterated on a few occasion since his election. I also allude to the current discussion between Trump and North Korean President Kin Jong-un about nuclear weapons. See CNN's bulletin from 17 October 2017: "N. Korea: Nuclear War May Break Out Any Moment," https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2017/10/17/exp-tsr-todd-north-korea-nuclear-missile-threat.cnn
110 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy*? (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 180.

> If the archive were to be destroyed, would anything of 'man' remain? Art gives man the ability to imagine himself as eternally present, beyond any particular epoch or text, and yet also places this eternity in the fragile tomb of a material object: even if the material lasts only for a few seconds it will give sensation the power to exist and be preserved in itself in the eternity that coexists with this short duration.[111]

Shaw's works can be seen as ephemeral expressions of the present collective contemporary imaginary about extinction. It also bears preoccupations about the preservation of the archive. By appropriating documentary films from the 1960s and 1970s, he offers an illustration of how a work of art can or cannot successfully carry its ideas through time, and be seen by people who were not present at the moment of its creation.

The last concept from the realm of atavism that will be touched upon in this discussion is the notion of post-cinematic atavism, as described by film historian Richard Grusin. Grusin's essay explores the concept in regards to the movie *Melancholia* (Nordisk Film, 2011) by Danish director Lars Von Trier (b. 1956, Kongens Lyngby, Denmark). Grusin suggests that the work "makes stylistic, aesthetic, and cinematic choices that exhibit or display a kind of atavism—a reversion to or re-emergence of an earlier cinematic moment through the anachronistic expression in the present of prior, even outmoded cinematic traits that otherwise appear to have become extinct in the proliferation of hypermediated, digital, post-cinematic technical and aesthetic formats."[112] Without going into details in the narrative of the movie, I would like to consider Grusin's application of atavism to a cinematic work, and in a discussion about an aesthetic. This leads us back to formal considerations of the cinematic medium and the archive, as detailed in the previous section. Whereas the origin of atavism is linked to biological and human evolution, it can also be used as an analytical tool, or a metaphor. While Grusin claims that *Melancholia* is said to be "anachronistic" and to use "outmoded traits" otherwise extinct, I argue that these traits also imbue Shaw's work, notably through the use of the archive and obsolete technology. In this sense, it self-references both its medium and its aesthetic.

Melancholia is an apocalyptic movie that follows its characters through their last moments before a rogue planet collides with our own, presumably annihilating every living organism in the process. The movie ends with an image of the planet (dubbed the titular Melancholia) approaching the earth while the characters passively anticipate the end, protected

111 Deleuze and Guattari, 166.
112 Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (eds), *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film* (Falmer: REFRAME Books, 2016), 2.

by what looks like an Indigenous teepee. The image cuts to black before the credits begin. Grusin underlines the coincidence of the narrative's and the cinema's simultaneous terminations. He proposes looking at these concurrent endings as if "the collision of narrative and technical duration coincides with the collision of the two planets and the eradication not only of the diegetic world on the screen but of the cinematic image itself—as Von Trier ends the movie with several seconds of void, black screen, before the credits begin."[113] In doing so, the narrative becomes connected with the medium, as both terminate at the same time. For an association to be made between the movie and its medium, a reference to the medium or "container" must exist in the "content," a reference to earlier styles and aesthetics (atavism). *Liminals* fits the criteria. This artist's cinema bears the atavistic trait of documentary redemption cinema, until the penultimate data-moshing sequence. Data-moshing is the intentional creation of video-compression artefacts. Making an appearance in video art in the mid-2000s, it is nowadays associated with net art and the glitch aesthetic, and evokes images of the early Internet in the 1990s. I suggest that the inclusion of a relatively recent video effects technique to archival material is an occurrence of post-cinematic atavism. When considering the age of the medium and the mimicked found footage from the 1970s, the data-moshing sequence comes as an anachronistic and atavistic trait from the future, therefore entailing the end of the medium at the same time as the end of the narrative, as the Liminals transcend to the next stage of evolution.

A question remains: Is this ending romantic or dramatic? In regards to *Melancholia*, Steven Shaviro's account of the affective and cinematic unfolding of the film's final scene in relation to the "beautiful semblance" of romanticist aesthetics is powerful, but he also claims that "In the final moments of *Melancholia*, everything is staked on a fantasy of primitivism when this fantasy is no longer able to operate."[114] Hence, if the ending is romanticized, it nonetheless expresses the limitation of the fantasy of primitivism, which is no longer possible, which could also be understood as: building a teepee will not save white people from a giant, burning planet on a collision course with the earth. The Liminals will never return to a pure pre-quantification existence because they became cyborgs who are heavily dependent on injections of synthetic DNA to perform their rituals. Here, playing with mirrored balls and doing yoga will not send them back in time. They might have successfully transcended, but the rest of humanity remains

113 Denson and Leyda, 9.
114 Steven Shaviro, "Melancholia, or, the Romantic Anti-Sublime," *SequenceOne* 1. no. 1 (2012): 11.

on earth, on the verge of extinction. The narrative suggests that evolution is what caused their current fragility, but that it also implies a potential solution to avoid extinction. When viewed at the level of the cinematic apparatus, it is a rather terrible ending for the archival 16-mm black-and-white movie that ends up being violently blasted by psychedelic colours and digital compression glitch. In this sense, the future of celluloid film appears as imperfect and unstable as the narratives of the works themselves.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have analyzed Jeremy Shaw's contemporary artworks *Liminals* in close relationship to *Quickeners*, his earlier work in *The Quantification Trilogy*. Four aspects are helpful in understanding how Shaw's works warn us about a possible dystopic future, and can be interpreted as attempts to make viewers aware of their responsibilities in regard to the present. The first two works in the trilogy use the techno-anxiety of our current time to propose a speculative reality in a future where humans and machines merge. The characters in the two stories loosely appropriate tools from the past in order to escape a world of hyperconnectedness where technology invades the body. By playing on fears associated with recent developments in technology, Shaw presents a narrative to which the viewers can relate. Shaw's practice is deeply rooted in popular culture and personal experiences. To better understand the styles, movements, and trends that might have inspired him, the second section of this thesis focused on the spiritual tools for transcendence presented in *Liminals*. The characters use electronic music, dance, and technologies to reach an altered state of consciousness. Historically, subcultures such as the hippie movement and adepts of the rave and psytrance cultures shared similar interests in these tools for similar spiritual quests. Themes of rebirth, ecstasy, and art also echo the myth of the Greek god Dionysus, and prove that the ideas put forth by Shaw have been at the core of human preoccupations for thousands of years. If the advent of new technologies provides new tools to experiment with, death, the belief in an unknown "beyond," and the will to escape from an unsatisfying reality are recurrent themes in art, culture, and spirituality. A major aspect of Shaw's work is the collapse of time. Speculative fiction set in the future, the artist's cinema presents characters obsessed with the past, which is our present. Their belief that the barriers of time can be transcended motivates them to attempt redemptive time travel. Haunted by the disappearance of their human ancestors, they have felt deeply nostalgic and disoriented since losing the ability to believe, due to their embrace of technological salvation. Deconstructing the interdependencies of time in *Liminals* and *Quickeners* is a complex yet crucial task to perform to get a full understanding of what they do. A fourth concept, the multifaceted and highly controversial notion of atavism, comes as a reminder of the complexities of language and of how pervasive ideologies can become normalized. Atavism and its declinations—technological primitivism and post-cinematic atavism—are words historically associated with racist categorizations of bodies,

eugenics, and worldviews. Bringing back these words today is a risky enterprise on Shaw's part, especially given his position as a white cis-male settler; however, his use of the terms instead creates a productive tension for viewers to critically reflect upon.

Woven into this analysis were also precedents that inspired the works or anchored them in a recent history of art and new media arts. For instance, the Spiritualist movement and the psychedelic sixties provide instances of how past technologies have been deployed for spiritual experimentations and explorations of the immaterial plane, and acted to enhance the human body. Brion Gysin's *Dream Machine*, a device designed with the sole purpose of provoking physical and cerebral reactions in the human body, constituted a precedent for the light patterns and devices used by Shaw's protagonists to achieve altered states of consciousness. It was also a cultural reference voluntarily included by the artist in his narrative. Susan Hiller's works on auras and levitation are relevant contemporary points of comparison to underline the ways in which *Liminals* and *Quickeners* are unique in that they not only reflect on the present, but anticipate the future. To summarize, characters in both *Liminals* and *Quickeners* attempt to invoke atavism by means of techgnosis. They do so through a hauntological time-travelling enabled by using spiritual and technological tools for transcendence, in order to skip a few generations in their evolutionary curve and reach the future, where they would exist in an atavistic form similarly to their ancestors.

Liminals and *Quickeners* exacerbate the dystopian qualities of the present day by depicting a speculative future. They act as a warning coming from a hypothetical future, as both the expression of a feeling of anxiety linked with imagining the future and a nostalgic reminder of the past, still visible but out of reach. By looking back at these subcultures from the twentieth century, and forward to a futurity imagined through tropes of science fiction, the work underlines the relationship and the interdependencies of the viewer's past and present with their bodies yet to come, in biological, spiritual, and ideological ways. In many instances, the work creates a productive tension by risking being open to interpretations that reinforce long-standing prejudices associated with colonialism, racism, and secularization of the modern state, and playing with stereotypes of the primitive and the tribal. In this way, it rather adequately conveys the sometimes-absurd spiritual salad of the present, which contains many elements that have been debated since time began. It successfully conveys the feelings of disorientation caused by the widespread use of technology, and the loss of a feeling of community, or of something larger

than oneself to believe in. It urges the viewer to escape from the realm of the rational, to transcend the state of disenchantment provoked by the routine. The work expresses the duality of the need to indulge in fundamentally Dionysian expressions like dance, music, and drugs, but also confronts the viewer with the image of people singing and dancing while humanity is on the verge of extinction—which can be seen as a reflection of today's heteronormative white Eurocentric understanding of society's attitude in a context of political and ecological crisis. Overall, this leads us to think more responsibly about the future and how we approach it.

Both Liminals and Quickeners are depicted as marginalized communities, who by transcending leave the rest of humanity behind. This brings us back to the individualistic nature of our capitalist era. It also echoes preoccupations of survivalist movements, notably the wealthy Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who build underground bunkers and gear up with weapons in preparation for the end of the world.[115] Just as in Shaw's work, in this situation it is the people with the most sophisticated technologies who will survive. This raises questions about our feelings of community and our capacity to feel empathy. It also makes us wonder what is the nature of spirituality and the sacred today. Some people, like Quickeners, can choose to reject their technology-dominated world as a spiritual practice. Our dependency on hyperconnectedness sometimes feels like a trap, and this is a topic being discussed more and more often in work environments and mainstream media.

In light of this analysis, it becomes almost inevitable to wonder what Shaw's third work in the trilogy, *I Can See Forever* (2018), will be about. In an era of seemingly insatiable popular demand for dystopian stories, one can wonder how he will to sustain the interest of his viewers. It is said to be about the life of a cyborg, born in the context of a failed government experiment that aimed to create a synthesis between human and machine. Will it raise considerations about robot ethics? Or attempt to create another productive tension, this time by borrowing and playing with essentialist ideas? When it comes to the future, one can only speculate.

115 Evan Osnos, "Doomsday Prep for the Super-Rich, " *The New Yorker*, 30 January 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/doomsday-prep-for-the-super-rich, accessed 29 July 2018.

Figures

Fig. 1. Jeremy Shaw, *Liminals*, 2017, HD video installation, colour, 5.1 soundtrack, variable dimensions. 31 minutes, 24 seconds. Installation view at the Venice Biennale, König Gallery, Berlin.

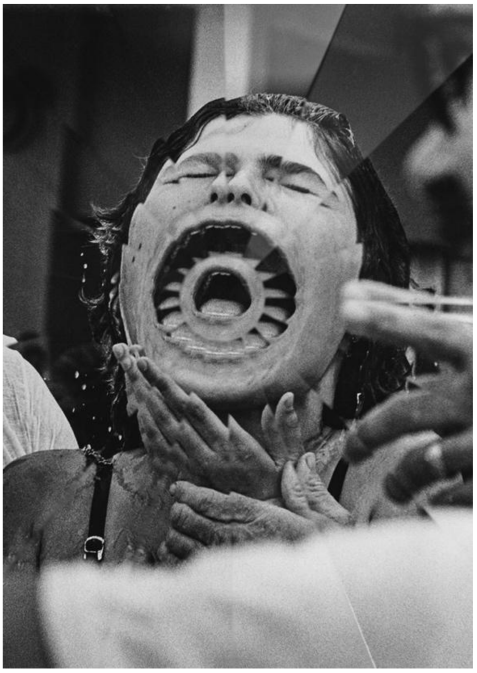

Fig. 2. Jeremy Shaw, *Towards Universal Pattern Recognition (Baptism Bayfront Center)*, 2016, archival black-and-white photograph, acrylic, chrome, 42.5 cm × 38.7 cm × 16 cm. König Gallery, Berlin, Germany.

Fig. 3. Jeremy Shaw, *Towards Universal Pattern Recognition (Claude Missmer of Whitehall raises his arms during a song. 8/21/89)*, 2016, archival black-and-white photograph, acrylic, chrome, 42.5 cm × 37.5 cm × 16 cm. König Gallery, Berlin, Germany.

Fig. 4. Jeremy Shaw, still from *Liminals*, 2017, HD video installation, colour, 5.1 soundtrack, variable dimensions. 31 minutes, 24 seconds. Image taken at 7 minutes, 28 seconds.

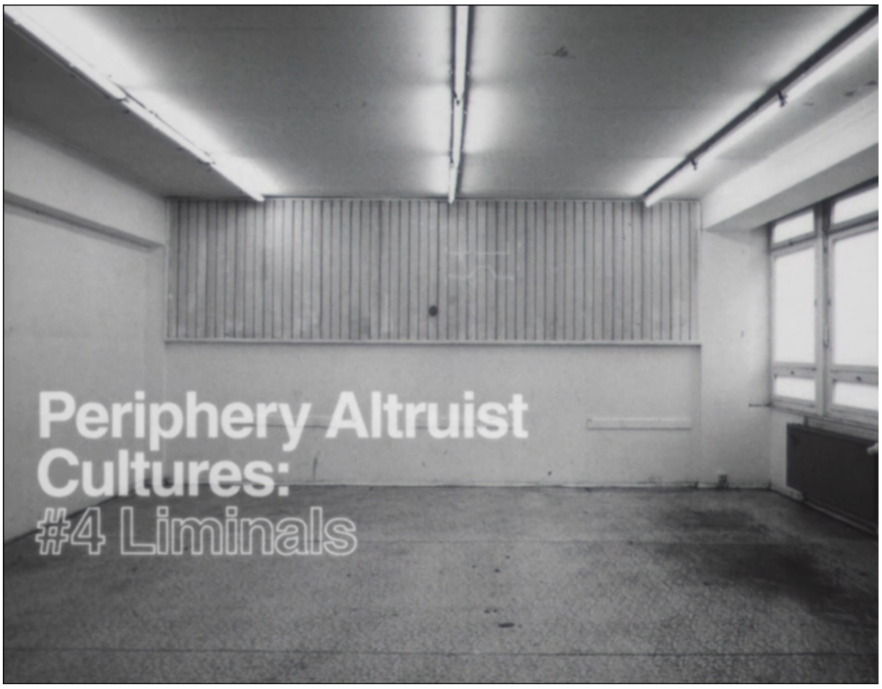

Fig. 5. Jeremy Shaw, still from *Liminals*, 2017, HD video installation, colour, 5.1 soundtrack, variable dimensions. 31 minutes, 24 seconds. Image taken at 1 minute, 36 seconds.

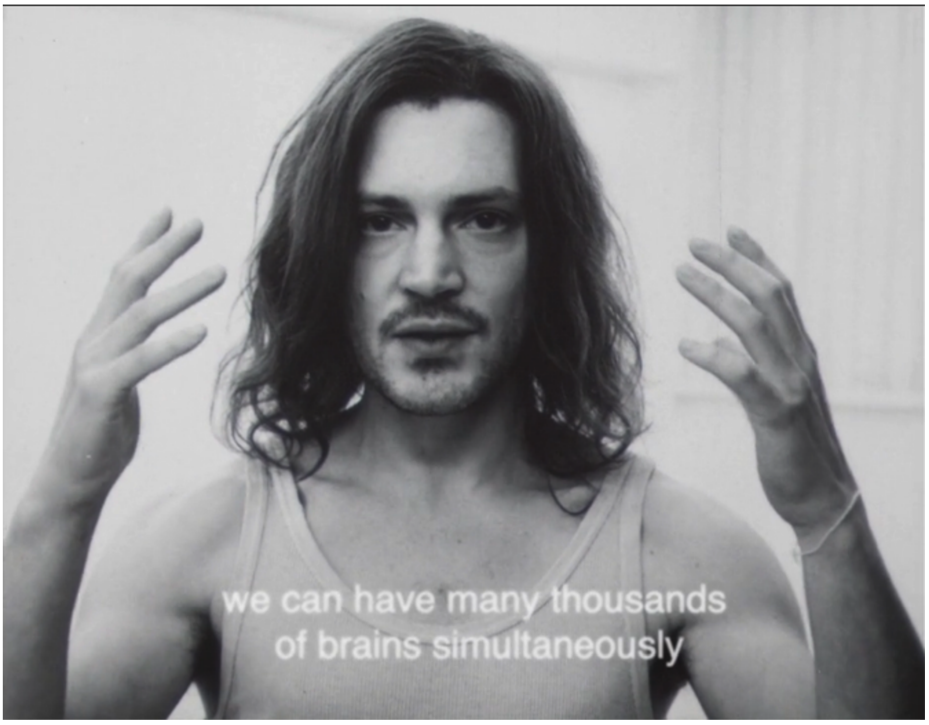

Fig. 6. Jeremy Shaw, still from *Liminals*, 2017, HD video installation, colour, 5.1 soundtrack, variable dimensions. 31 minutes, 24 seconds. Image taken at 5 minutes, 59 seconds.

Fig. 7. Jeremy Shaw, still from *Liminals*, 2017, HD video installation, colour, 5.1 soundtrack, variable dimensions. 31 minutes, 24 seconds. Image taken at 17 minutes, 17 seconds.

Fig. 8. Jeremy Shaw, still from *Liminals*, 2017, HD video installation, colour, 5.1 soundtrack, variable dimensions. 31 minutes, 24 seconds. Image taken at 17 minutes, 51 seconds.

Fig. 9. Jeremy Shaw, still from *Liminals*, 2017, HD video installation, colour, 5.1 soundtrack, variable dimensions. 31 minutes, 24 seconds. Image taken at 26 minutes 55 seconds.

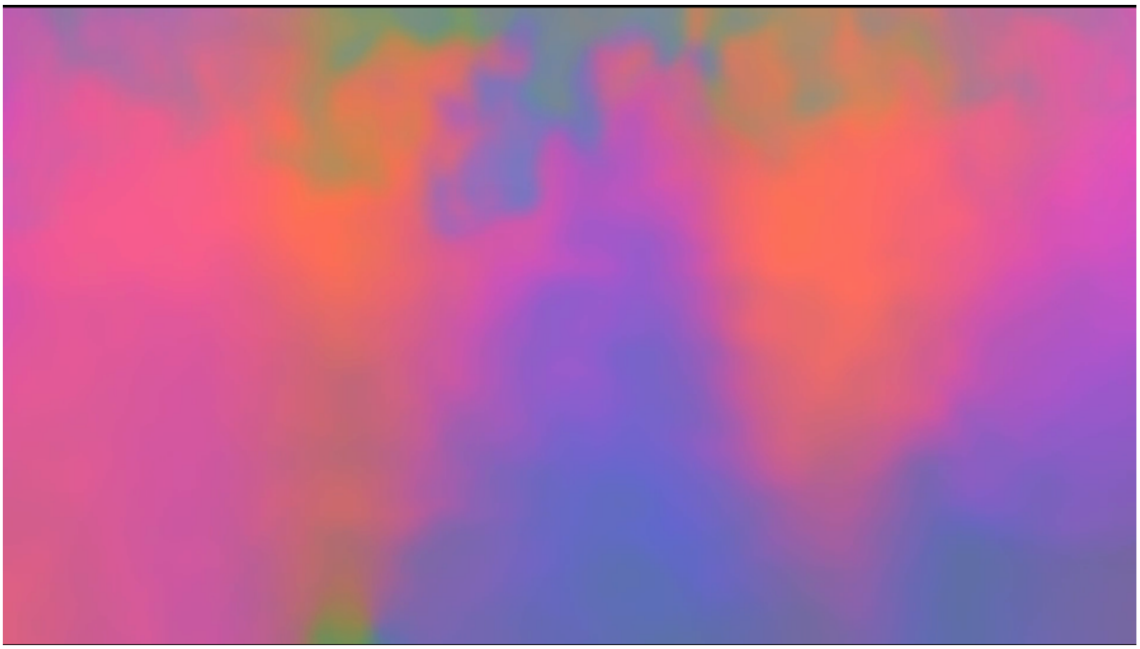

Fig. 10. Jeremy Shaw, still from *Liminals*, 2017, HD video installation, colour, 5.1 soundtrack, variable dimensions. 31 minutes, 24 seconds. Image taken at 29 minutes, 20 seconds.

Fig. 11. Jeremy Shaw, still from *Quickeners*, 2014, video, colour, with original soundtrack, variable dimensions. 36 minutes, 40 seconds. Image taken at 35 minutes, 43 seconds.

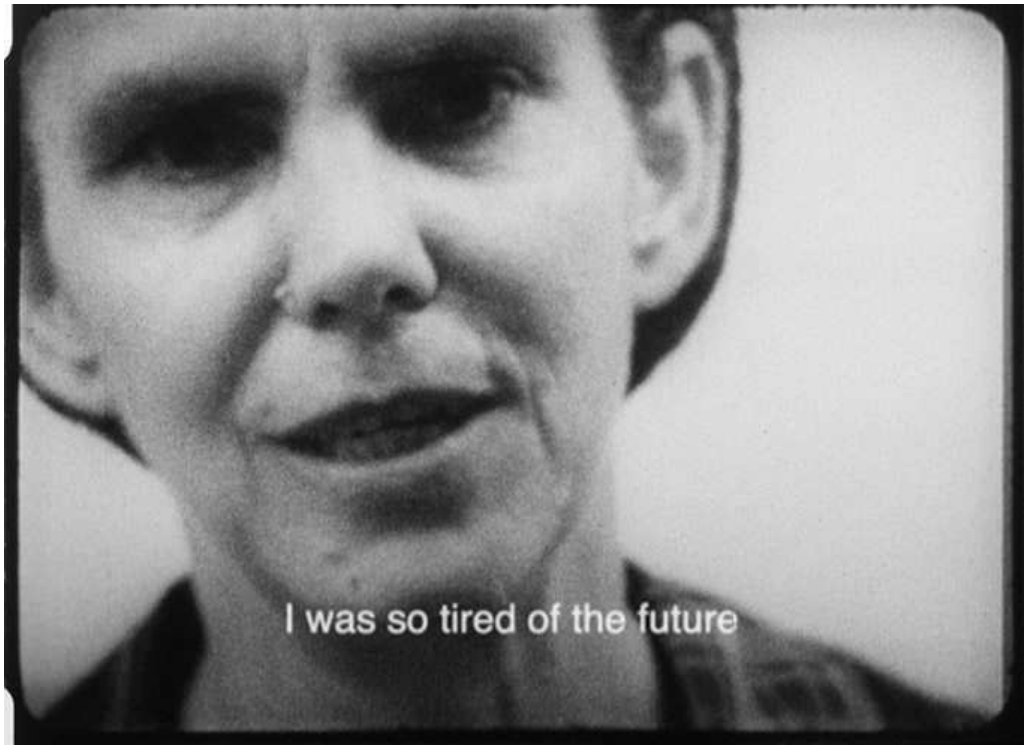

Fig. 12. Jeremy Shaw, still from *Quickeners*, 2014, video, colour, with original soundtrack, variable dimensions. 36 minutes, 40 seconds. Image taken at 8 minutes, 20 seconds.

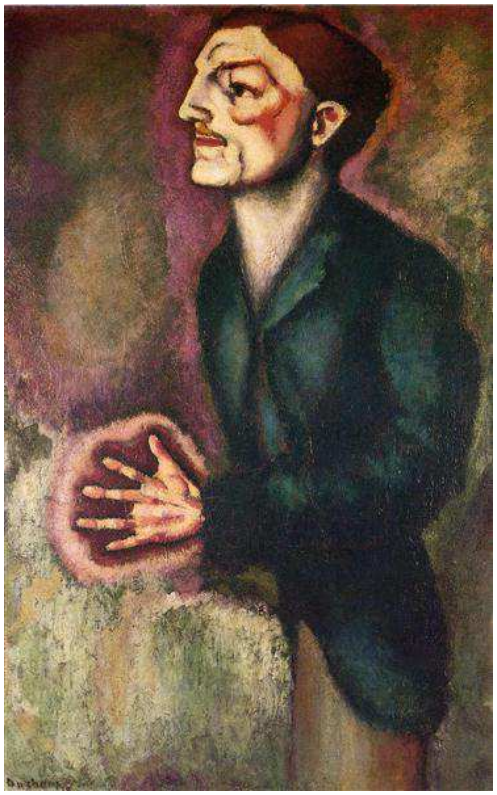

Fig. 13. Marcel Duchamp, *Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel*, 1910, oil on canvas, 100.3 × 65.7 cm. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/Estate of Marcel Duchamp.

Fig. 14. Susan Hiller, *Homage to Marcel Duchamp: Auras*, 2008, fifty colour archival dry prints, each 30.5 × 30.5 cm; 381 × 381 cm overall.

Fig. 15. Susan Hiller, *Homage to Yves Klein: Levitations*, 2008. 150 monochrome dry prints, each 10.2 × 15.2 cm arranged in 25 framed composites; 170 x 170 cm overall.

Fig. 16. Yves Klein, *Leap into the Void*, 1960, photographed by Harry Shunk, gelatin silver print, 25.9 × 20 cm. Purchased by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift through Joyce and Robert Menschel. Rights and Reproduction: Yves Klein, ADAGP, Paris; Photo: Harry Shunk-Kender, Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.

Fig. 17. Brion Gysin, *Dream Machine*, ed. 1961, perforated metal. Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

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